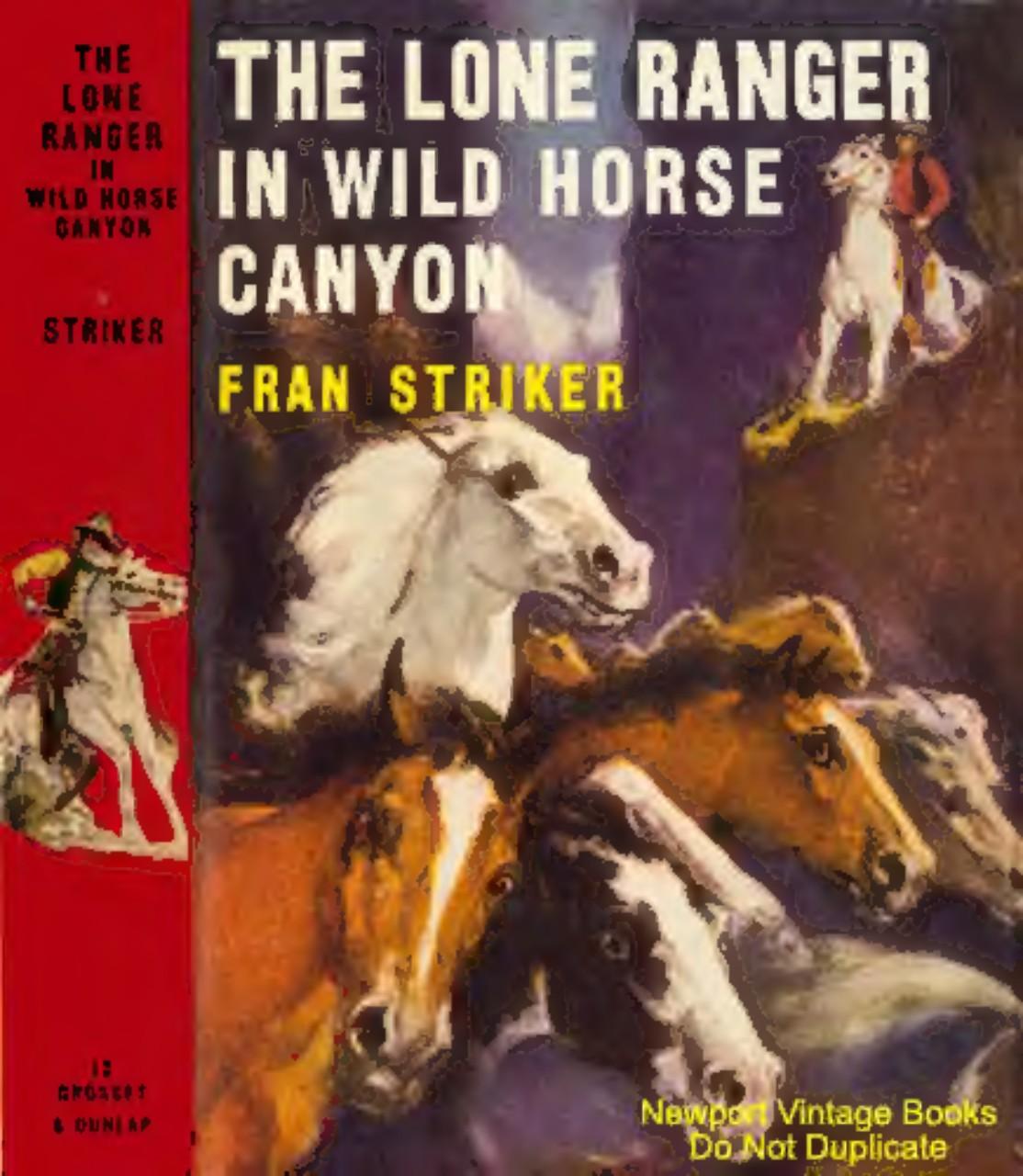


THE
LONE
RANGER
IN
WILD HORSE
CANYON
STRIKER

THE LONE RANGER IN WILD HORSE CANYON

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THE LONE RANGER IN WILD HORSE CANYON

CHAPTER ONE Wild Horse Stampede

THE MASKED HORSEMAN rode alone through the unfriendly night. Pelting rain, driven by a wild wind, beat against his face and flattened back the brim of his hat. He held the reins loosely, letting his snow-white stallion pick its own way eastward to the rocky shore of Wolf Creek.

Intermittent flashes of lightning gave the masked man brief glimpses of the stream. It was swollen to twice its normal size and lashed by wind to angry foam. Wave after wave piled up and exploded against huge boulders with a constant roaring, tumbling sound that filled the gaps between bursts of thunder.

The floor of Wild Horse Canyon was a level strip five miles long and half a mile wide, with Wolf Creek approximately in the center. At the point which the lone horseman had reached, sheer walls of rock rose about a hundred feet on both sides of the canyon. Above the walls the rust-colored Colorado Mountains, studded with evergreens, towered to awe-inspiring heights. But the solitary horseman had no time to view the grandeur of Nature as revealed by lightning. He was looking for a bridge.

"At any other time," he muttered, "we might swim across the stream, Silver, but not on a night like this."

There was a great companionship between the tall, erect masked man and his horse. The beautiful animal caught the soft

resonance of his master's voice and half turned his head as if to say he understood.

The rider patted the sleek white neck. "I wouldn't ask you to tackle that stream tonight, Silver. We'll—"

Silver suddenly came to an abrupt halt, and whatever his rider was going to say was never said. The horse stood like a statue, tense and motionless. Then he began to tremble nervously, his head raised in a listening attitude and his ears cocked forward.

The man in the saddle was equally tense. Eternal vigilance was the price he paid for safety. On a number of occasions Silver had given warning of impending danger. Was this another of those times when Silver was the first to sense some near-by peril? The rider listened.

The night was filled with noise, but the pelting of rain on sodden ground and the pounding of the stream on its rock bed were nothing new. Silver had become accustomed to these sounds. What new manifestation of man or Nature was alerting the sensitive animal to some danger, some presence, some situation out of the ordinary?

Thunder crashed again, louder and closer than at any previous time. It was a ground-jarring detonation that shook both horse and rider. It was a sound like the crack of doom, but the lightning it accompanied was even more spectacular. The bolt began as a dazzling ball of fire, high in the clouds. It hurtled downward to end with a brilliant display of showering sparks and jagged fire on the bank of Wolf Creek just a hundred yards ahead.

The thunder rumbled off into the distance, echoing and re-echoing long after the light was gone.

"Steady, Silver. Steady there, old fellow," the masked man soothed as he stroked the strong white neck. "You're all right, Silver. We haven't much farther to go. I saw the bridge just ahead. In fact, that

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lightning struck quite close to it. Let's shove on and see if there's been any damage. Come on, Silver."

Silver moved ahead slowly, keeping his head high and alert, and turned slightly to the right, in the direction of the mountain named Old Baldy. The horse was obviously concerned about something between the flooded stream and the towering canyon



wall—something that was shrouded by the darkness—something more frightening than a thunderbolt.

"Whoa, boy."

The horseman dismounted beside heavy timbers set in rocky ground. Until a few minutes ago these timbers had supported one end of the bridge, but now

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they supported nothing. The bridge was gone.

He was not dismayed. He had half expected to find the bridge washed out by the flood. If this proved to be the case, he had made up his mind to wait on the west side of the stream until daybreak rather than risk a crossing with his horse, in darkness. The fact that the bridge had been destroyed by a bolt of lightning instead of by the flood in no way changed his plans.

There was a sudden jerk on the reins, which the masked man was still holding after dismounting. Silver whinnied sharply and reared high.

"What's the matter with you, Silver?"

Silver's front hoofs hit the ground, and then he reared again. Wind whipped his mane and tail. His eyes were wide and staring toward Old Baldy.

"Calm down! Take it easy." The horseman pulled on the reins and spoke in a sharper voice. "Stop it, Silver! What's gotten into you?" He gathered the reins, gripped the pommel, and swung back into the saddle.

"Now take it slow, Silver. Calm down, big fellow." He continued talking, but nothing he said had any effect on the powerful stallion.

Silver snorted and whinnied; he pawed the ground and reared. He had acted this way only once before, and that was long ago, before he and the masked man had found each other. It was before he had known the restraint of any bridle or the weight of any saddle. Then he had been a wild horse, fighting to hold the leadership of the pack in the valley where he had ruled as king. Now he was once more geared for battle, ready to meet all comers.

A flash of lightning that made the canyon almost as bright as day revealed the reason for the stallion's manner. A band of wild horses, more than a hundred of them, was charging through the canyon from the south. The clatter of their hoofs on the

canyon floor drowned out the roaring of the stream. On they came, a single horse racing ahead of the pack.

That horse carried a rider!

CHAPTER TWO Silver Takes Action

DURING THE FLASH of lightning, Silver, too, had seen the charging horses. With this confirmation of his suspicion that an enemy was approaching, the big white stallion became more violent in his actions than before. In his eagerness to let the wild pack know that he was unafraid, he didn't even hear his master's commands.

The masked man realized only too well that he was trapped between the rushing torrent and the oncoming stampede of wild horses. Though fully aware of his peril, he was concerned less for his own safety than for the safety of the rider he had seen racing madly a scant ten yards ahead of the horde. While he lurched and swayed and fought to bring Silver under control, he tried to consider a line of action. He wore two guns, but quickly rejected the thought of using them. It was too dark for accurate shooting. Moreover, though he might drop some of the front-line horses, others would come surging on. Bullets wouldn't stop that fury. Bullets wouldn't slow it down. Not even silver bullets.

Those silver bullets studding the gun belt and filling the chambers of the two ivory-handled guns had become a mark of identity of the masked man and his horse. People in all parts of the West had learned to associate the silver bullets and the mask with an individual who was known as the Lone Ranger.

Throughout the West the Lone Ranger had become an almost legendary character. Countless stories were told of his adventures. He was known as a defender of the weak and a champion of justice. He

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often came out of nowhere to lend his strength and fighting skill to people who were oppressed. He had fought to aid the Army in war against Indian uprisings; to aid communities overrun by outlaws; to track down criminals of every type; to aid sheriffs, marshals, and other lawmen; and to aid plain, humble people who sought nothing but a chance to work and live and raise a family on their frontier holdings.

There were many who remembered the Lone Ranger in their prayers, but there were few who knew anything about his private life. No one even knew his real name; no one, that is, except a faithful Indian called Tonto.

Tonto knew the story of the masked man's past. Tonto had known him as a Texas Ranger.

He had been one of a group of Texas Rangers riding through a canyon in pursuit of a notorious band of criminals. The outlaws had poured ruthless gunfire from both walls of the canyon and had ridden away convinced that all six of the Rangers were dead. But one man had survived, kept alive by sheer will power and a burning determination to live and avenge his partners. Tonto had found him and recognized him as a boyhood friend. He had carried him to a cave where with careful nursing and tender care the Indian had saved the Ranger's life. Then the two had planned a program of retribution on the outlaws.

Tonto had fashioned a mask to conceal the Ranger's face so the outlaws would not know there had been a survivor. The Ranger had made arrangements for the partial operation of a silver mine to supply him with enough cash for his simple needs and with metal for special bullets that would in time come to distinguish him from outlaws who wore masks. There were countless other details that had to be given attention, but finally the last of these was

disposed of, and the sole survivor of the Texas Ranger band was ready for action.

Officially the man was dead. There was a cross bearing his name in the neat row of grave markers where his five companions lay at rest. His identity was gone. He was a man without a name—without a home. He was the Lone Ranger.

With Tonto riding at his side, the Lone Ranger traveled to all parts of the West in his grim pursuit of the outlaws who had taken part in that fatal ambush. The gang had broken up and scattered. Each individual had to be sought out and hunted down separately. Finally all but the leader had been brought to justice. The trail of the leader was the most difficult of all to follow. The wily criminal knew that he was being pursued by the greatest of all man hunters, and he used every trick of cunning to throw the masked man off the trail. He changed his name a number of times and frequently used disguises. He traveled north as far as the Canadian border, then doubled back to St. Joe. He moved west from there, going all the way to California, and then cut south to Mexico. Week after week, month after month, the Lone Ranger and Tonto kept on his trail. They lost track of the fugitive many times and found it only after patient and painstaking search.

During the long chase the Lone Ranger found a number of opportunities to aid the law in capturing lesser criminals. There were times when he turned from his major purpose to help pioneers who found themselves in difficulty. Once he paused to help a horse, and for this he was amply rewarded. The horse was grateful to the man who had saved its life and acknowledged him as its master. The beautiful white stallion stayed at the Lone Ranger's side and proved as loyal and faithful as Tonto—and just as brave and tireless. The masked man called the great horse "Silver." He was

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riding Silver when at long last he ran down the outlaw leader.

The masked man had fulfilled the pledge to bring to justice every one of the outlaws who had taken part in the murder of the five Texas Rangers. He might have rested then. He might have become a miner or a cattleman, or he might have turned to farming. But none of these callings appealed to him. He had seen during the years of his search so much of Western outlawry that he burned with a desire to stamp out crime. He knew that this was more than any one man could accomplish, but he was determined to do his part by dedicating his life to the service of his fellow man.

The Lone Ranger had earned a number of rewards only to turn down every one. Each new adventure added to the list of people who were grateful, and to the list of enemies who sought his life. Each man he sent to jail had friends who vowed to kill the Lone Ranger. His life was constantly in danger. He knew this and took what precautions were possible. He was constantly alert and ready for trouble. He was never without his guns or mask. He wore the mask at all times, even when he was alone. There was a reason for this. He wanted it to be a part of him, rather than an awkward hindrance.

That is why he was wearing the mask when he rode through the stormy night

on his way to join Tonto, who was waiting in a cave in the canyon wall east of Wolf Creek.

"How long will Tonto have to wait?" he thought as he pitched and swayed with Silver's wild gyrations. It was a vague, fleeting thought that intruded on more immediate problems.

The din of hoofs was louder than all other sounds. It rose above the roaring stream and the noises Silver made. It rose above the thunder. In another flash of lightning the Lone Ranger could see the unknown rider close at hand and just beyond him the oncoming horses. The rider crouched low in his saddle and headed for the place where the bridge had been—the place where Silver pawed and stomped defiance.

In that last flash of lightning, Silver took command of things. With a mighty lurch, the great horse charged. The Lone Ranger was almost jerked out of the saddle, but he recovered quickly and clung to die reins. He passed within a few feet of the other horseman, and an instant later heard a shrill cry of dismay as that unknown individual realized there was no bridge.

The Lone Ranger couldn't turn to learn the other's fate. He was too much occupied with his own desperate problem. Silver had brought him face to face with the plunging front ranks of the wild pack.

CHAPTER THREE To the Rescue

WHEN SILVER CHALLENGED the leader of the wild horse band he drew on recollections of the days when he, too, had been untamed.

Silver had inherited the instincts of a conqueror and the strength of a champion. His father had been the king of a pack of wild horses. Silver, as a colt, had traveled at his father's side.

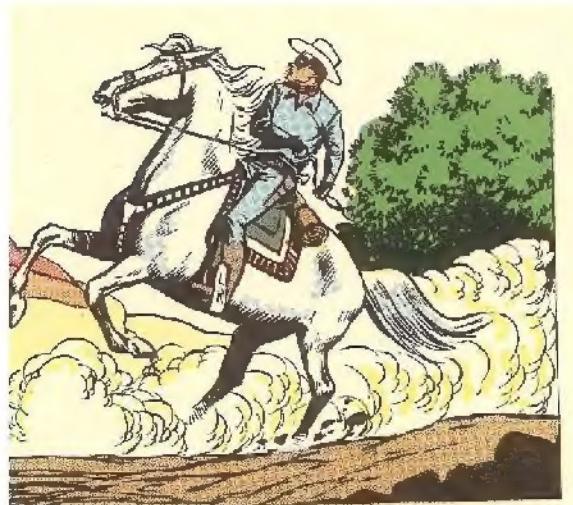
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When his father died, strong horses in the pack had fought each other for leadership. Silver had won the exalted position by overpowering every adversary.

During his rule he had met and beaten down each challenge until every stallion, every mare, and every yearling in Green Valley acknowledged him as undisputed king. After that, life had become dull and uninteresting. The high-spirited Silver felt the need of combat and adventure, so he had left the verdant pastures that had been his home and crossed the mountains into the world outside.

Here was a new country. He raced across the level plains at top speed. Then suddenly he stopped. On the path directly ahead there stood a challenger. It was a stupendous-looking creature, unlike anything the white horse had ever known. It was muddy, and its hair was shaggy and tangled. The small, blood-red eyes were filled with evil and hatred. It was a huge buffalo who pawed the ground and bellowed in fury. The monster charged at Silver, but the horse dodged nimbly to the side. This was a new kind of battle. As the buffalo raced past him, Silver felt the rough fur brush his own sleek coat, and a foul odor filled his sensitive nostrils. Silver reared high and struck down with force enough to drop any horse, but the twin blows which landed squarely on the buffalo's humped shoulders didn't even shake the infuriated creature.

The buffalo turned and charged again, and then again, while Silver delivered blow after blow with his hoofs. Clouds of dust rose from beneath the churning hoofs. The buffalo's head was like a battering ram driving into Silver's side. Silver began to feel exhausted, but the buffalo seemed tireless. Gradually the horse grew weak and trembling, but his gallant heart would not admit defeat. He fought on desperately but hopelessly until sheer exhaustion brought



him to the ground. He lay there helpless, looking up with fearless eyes to meet his death that was so close at hand. The buffalo drew several yards closer and gloated as he pawed the ground and lowered his head to deliver the death blow. The monster charged. Then some unseen force halted him in mid-air. He crumpled to the ground and lay there motionless.

Silver had heard the loud crack of a gun as the buffalo fell. A moment later he saw a man approaching. Another enemy? He tried to rise, but the strength was gone from his legs.

The man came close and crouched beside his head. He felt caressing hands, then cool, soothing water on his wounds. It was then that the Lone Ranger and Silver met each other and became forever inseparable.

The old days in Green Valley came back to Silver now as he rushed to meet the leader of the wild horse pack. He forgot the man in the saddle. He was once more on his own, announcing with shrill whinnies his readiness to meet all challenges.

To the Lone Ranger each second seemed an eternity. He had never known such swift action. No bucking bronco had ever leaped so high or turned so quickly. Silver pawed and dodged. He kicked and bit. He reared high and struck down hard. It all happened in less than two minutes. During

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those two minutes the leader of the wild pack learned that Silver was the master. The maddened animals spread on either side of the white stallion and his rider. The mad stampede was halted, and then retreat was begun.

For a moment Silver stood there, trumpeting his victory in shrill calls that echoed against the canyon walls. Then he

became aware of the voice of his masked

"You stopped them, Silver! You turned them back, old fellow! Good work!"

Then there came the sound of another voice. It was shrill and desperate and it came from the foaming, churning water.

"Help! Help!"

"Great Scott!" exclaimed the masked man. "That rider must be in the water!" He pulled on the reins and said, "Come on, Silver. We've got to try to rescue him!"

Silver's fury had subsided. He responded to the reins and to the signals from his master's heels. Turning fast, he dashed ahead, plunging without hesitation into the flooded waters of Wolf Creek.

CHAPTER FOUR Shelter in the Storm

THE LONE RANGER was only half aware of the retreating band of wild horses. He was occupied with the immediate problem of rescuing the unknown individual from Wolf Creek. A flash of lightning gave him a momentary glimpse of a white face and one arm raised above the surging water.

"Come on, Silver!" he cried. "Faster, old fellow!" Silver stumbled on the stream's rocky bed near shore, but pushed on without hesitation into the current. The masked man in the saddle hated to subject his gallant horse to the perils of Wolf Creek, but with a human life at stake, there was no alternative.

Wind-whipped waves broke over the head of the swimming horse and threatened to tear his rider from the saddle. On all sides there were half-submerged jagged rocks to increase the hazard. Silver seemed to understand the task at hand. His powerful legs beat frantically to carry his master toward the spot where the unknown horseman had last been seen.

Another flash of lightning laced the black night sky, followed by a bellow of thunder.

"We're coming," the Lone Ranger shouted to the now barely struggling figure, whom he saw now just a few yards distant. "Try to stay—" The last of his speech was cut off by a mass of water that broke over his head. He coughed as he reached beneath the surface and brought up the lariat from the pommel of his saddle. The rope was wet and heavy and his fingers were stiff with cold, but he managed to loosen a noose. He held it high in readiness while Silver forged ahead inch by inch.

Once more the masked man saw a hand upraised. He whirled his rope. It whistled briefly and then the noose shot out. The masked man tugged, not knowing whether he had found the mark in darkness. The rope came taut. Another lightning flash revealed that the Lone Ranger had successfully lassoed the now unconscious swimmer.

"Now," he cried to Silver, "back to shore, old fellow. His knees pressed hard against the horse's sides as he drew in the rope.

In the meantime Silver had reversed his direction and was heading back toward the western shore of the stream while the man in the saddle pulled on his rope. His fingers closed on a mass of long hair. For the first time he realized as he pushed the dark long hair from the still white face, that the person he had saved from drowning was a girl. A moment later he held the limp form

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in his arms while Silver found sure footing and struggled up the bank.

The current had swept all three of them several hundred yards downstream during the brief struggle. It was good to be on firm ground once again despite the blackness of the night and the pelting of the rain.

The Lone Ranger crouched beside the stranger on the ground. As he reached for her wrist to feel for a pulse, he wondered momentarily about the other horse. He had not seen it in Wolf Creek. It might have drowned or it might have been dashed against the rocks and killed or injured. On the other hand, it might have reached shore safely somewhere downstream.

It was too dark to see the stranger's features, but the wrist was slim and soft.

"Alive," the masked man murmured as he felt the steady pulse.

The girl sighed and an unintelligible murmur escaped from her cold lips. The Lone Ranger removed his hat, which had been held in place by a strap beneath his chin, and held it to keep the rain from falling on her face.

"Take it easy," he said. "You're all right."

"I—I—" began the girl falteringly.

"Don't try to speak until you feel stronger."

"The—the bridge—"

"It's gone."

"My—my horse—"

"Let us hope he made shore safely."

Her voice was faint but pleasing. Fatigue and fear, the masked man decided, had contributed more to her loss of consciousness than water. She was trying to sit up. "Not just yet," he said softly. "Lie right where you are for a few minutes until your strength returns. In the meantime I am going to try to rig up some kind of shelter."

"Shelter," repeated the girl.

"There are some trees not far from here, and I have a tarpaulin rolled behind my

saddle. Stay where you are and I'll be back presently."

The Lone Ranger found a small, sharp axe among his gear and strode off toward the near-by trees, reasoning that with lightening bolts striking on all sides, it would be less hazardous to rig a shelter near the bank of the stream than to carry the girl beneath the trees, several of which already had been struck.

With the efficiency that came from long experience he lopped off and trimmed a number of low boughs cottonwood tree and carried them back to he had left the girl. Lashing the boughs together in a circle on the ground to make a cone-shaped framework. Over this he spread his tarpaulin. The was fashioned somewhat like an Indian tepee.

The girl was sitting up and watching Him as best she could in the darkness as he finished his task.

"A friend of mine named Tonto," the Lone Ranger said, "has a cave that would make an ideal shelter, but it's on the east side of the creek. I'll do the best I can to make you comfortable temporarily." He continued talking while he worked, not so much to explain what he was doing as to reassure the exhausted young woman.

His blankets were damp, but not sodden despite the immersion in the stream. They had been protected by a tightly rolled waterproof slicker. He spread the slicker on the wet grass beneath the wigwam and on top of it laid out the blankets.

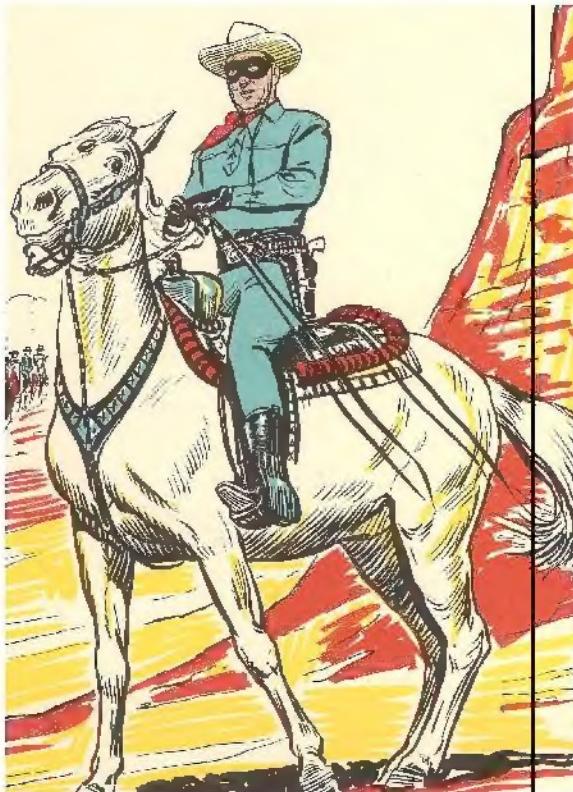
"Now," he said, bending over the girl, "I'll take you inside. Do you feel strong enough to walk or shall I carry you?"

"I—I can make it if you'll just help me get to my feet."

At that moment a flash of lightning revealed the Lone Ranger's face to the girl for the first time.

"You're—" she gasped, "you're masked!"

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The Lone Ranger seemed not to have heard her exclamation. He said, "You'll be more comfortable under the shelter, crude as it is." When they were both inside the tarpaulin tepee he continued, "Here is the driest blanket. You better wrap up in this one so you don't take cold. I'll have a fire going in a few minutes."

"A fire!" exclaimed the girl. "You can't possibly build a fire in rain like this!"

"I can try," the Lone Ranger replied. "I have matches in a waterproof case, and I think I can find some fairly dry wood." He picked up his axe and stepped outside. Returning to the trees, he found a section of a big tree that had fallen years before. Using his axe as a lever, exerted all his strength to roll the log until the dry underside was exposed. He attacked this with the axe and soon had an armload of short chunks of wood and a pocketful of dry chips with which to start the fire inside the tepee. His matches he knew would be dry as he always carried them, wrapped in oilskin.

Pulling back the blankets and the waterproof slicker, he uncovered the ground beneath the apex of the tent where a vent hole had been left. A moment later, to the girl's surprise, there was a small fire burning, its flickering yellow light shining on the Lone Ranger and the girl he had rescued. They saw each other clearly for the first time.

CHAPTER FIVE The Empty Wigwam

THE LONE RANGER noticed with amusement that the girl had been working with typical feminine efficiency while he had been occupied with gathering materials for the fire. Her dark brown hair, dried somewhat by vigorous rubbing with a blanket, was fixed in a soft coil low on her neck. She was an attractive girl of about nineteen or twenty, with nice teeth, a straight nose, and clear gray eyes,

He knew that she was studying him and wondering about his mask. She was the first to speak.

"That mask—what does it mean? Why are you hiding your face? Are you an outlaw?"

The Lone Ranger shook his head and said, "I'm not an outlaw."

"Then why—"

"I wear the mask because I want to conceal my identity."

"Obviously. But why—"

"Don't you think you have things mixed?"

"I have things mixed?" she asked, surprised.

The Lone Ranger nodded. "If you had hauled me out of that water," he said, "it would be your turn to ask questions."

"Oh, does the fact that you rescued me give you that exclusive privilege? You can't blame me for being curious. After all,

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most honest men do not hide behind a mask."

"By the same token, most pretty girls don't get themselves caught in a stampede of wild horses on a night like this—and in a place like this."

"It wasn't the wild horses—" the girl began, then stopped abruptly.

"You weren't running from that stampede?"

"Not at first." "What then?"

It doesn't matter. You have saved my life. I am grateful to you. Now may I leave or am I to be considered a prisoner?"

"Not a prisoner, not by any means. Whatever gave you that impression?"

The girl looked at the masked man steadily for several seconds without speaking.

"The Lone Ranger said, "you'll tell me where you live and I'll see you home."

"I can't go home." As she spoke a fleeting expression of anxiety crossed the girl's fine-featuted face. "I wish," she went on after a pause, "I knew more about you. Are you working with the gang?"

"I have no gang," replied the Lone Ranger, shaking his head. "What gang are you talking about?"

"The men who chased me. You must have seen them."

"I saw nothing but wild horses. They seemed to be pursuing you."

"They live in this canyon," the girl explained. "They must have cut between me and the men who were chasing me. I—I was running away from those men."

The tiny fire crackled cheerily. The thunder and lightning had ceased and the rain had diminished to a steady drizzle that beat down on the tarpaulin. It was warm beneath the shelter, almost cozy. The Lone Ranger's clothing and the girl's trim riding suit were still damp and steaming. The masked man leaned toward the fire and fed sticks to the flames while he pondered the

girl's surprising statements. If she had no place to go, she presented something of a problem. He couldn't leave her alone in Wild Horse Canyon, particularly if she was being pursued; and where he and Silver were going was no place for a girl.

He had come into Wild Horse Canyon in response to smoke signals which Tonto had sent up the day before from the hilltop. The message was one of urgency. At daybreak he and Silver would have to swim across Wolf Creek to meet his Indian friend in Tonto's cave. It was out of the question to try to take this girl.

The Lone Ranger moved back from the fire. He saw the dancing light reflected in the girl's brown eyes. She was watching the fire and seemed to be thinking.

"You told me that some men were chasing you," the Lone Ranger said.

The dark-haired girl nodded.

"They probably will come looking for you when it gets light."

Another nod. "It might have been better if I had drowned," the girl said softly. "Better for a lot of people. If the bridge had not been gone, I might have crossed the creek. Then I'd have been all right. But as it is—" she shrugged her shoulders hopelessly.

"I'm planning to cross it at daybreak when we can see where we're going. In the meantime I'm going to take a ride downstream and see if I can find your horse."

"Oh, if you could," the girl said eagerly. "He's a strong horse. In daylight he might be able to carry me across the creek!"

It was something like that that the Lone Ranger had in mind.

"I'll be back in a little while," he said.

She looked through the opening of the tent and watched the frame of her tall rescuer move toward Silver, mount, and ride away. The Lone Ranger found the other horse half a mile downstream. It was a

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sturdy mustang, standing quite unharmed beneath a tree. The horse made no attempt to run when the masked man came close and picked up the dangling reins.

The light from the small campfire shining through the tarpaulin served as a beacon to guide the Lone Ranger back. He dismounted and left Silver and the girl's mustang at ground hitch.

"I found your horse," he called cheerfully. "He's all right."

There was no answer from inside the tepee. The Lone Ranger strode to the opening and stepped inside. The blanket at one side of the fire was empty. The girl was gone.

"Hello there," the Lone Ranger called into the night. "Where are you?"

There was no reply.

"Where are you?" he shouted again in a louder voice.

Silence.

Less than an hour ago the presence of the mysterious girl had presented a problem. The Lone Ranger's problem existed no longer. He had only to wait until daybreak, then ford the stream and join his Indian friend in the cave. He could forget the entire incident of the stampede and the rescue of the girl. But could he forget it? The girl had been in danger. She had been pursued.

She could not go home. She might be in danger again. Apparently, from what she had said, she had no friends in the vicinity; She was somewhere out there in the rainy night unarmed and without a horse. She was at the mercy of the elements and perhaps of the men from whom she had been fleeing. Moreover, there was the ever-present danger of wild horses, who hated the sight of any intruder in their canyon home.

Had she left of her own accord, or had she been found and captured? Question after question rushed through the masked man's mind while he stood undecided at the

entrance to the empty tepee. Then his eyes fell on the place where he had left his gear on the opposite side of the fire from where the girl had sat. His mouth compressed itself in a grim, straight line. The girl might be alone and without a horse, but she was not unarmed. The scabbard that had held the Lone Ranger's rifle was empty!

He stooped and entered the tepee and dropped to his knees beside the open saddlebag. The flap had been thrown back. A box of rifle ammunition lay on the ground. It had been a fresh, unopened box, but now the lid was off and half the cartridges were missing. The Lone Ranger was not greatly concerned with the loss of the rifle and the ammunition. It was a very good rifle, but it could be replaced, and he still had two heavy pistols. What bothered him was the sudden unexplained disappearance of the girl. He wondered about it as he replaced the lid on the box of cartridges and put it back into the saddlebag.

It was then that he found the message. It was written with a charred stick on the smooth leather flap of the bag. The message said: "Thank you for saving me. If you are not already an outlaw, you might become one by aiding me further, for I am a fugitive."



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CHAPTER SIX Murder in the Dark

THE LONE RANGER remained motionless for some time. He squatted in the firelight studying the charcoal-written message and wondering what it meant. The girl's eyes had held a hunted look. During her brief stay in the wigwam, she had seemed alert and tense, ready to flee at an instant's notice. Who were the men who had been pursuing her? Why had she fled? She needed help and needed it badly, yet she had fled from her rescuer. Or had she? It was unthinkable to leave Wild Horse Canyon without learning more about what had impelled her to leave the shelter of the tepee and vanish into the night. For the masked man there was just one line of action. He had to find the girl.

He turned to the dying fire and drew both of his heavy pistols from their holsters. He examined them carefully, noting with satisfaction that their well-oiled working parts had not been affected by the water.

Scraping some damp earth over the red coals, the masked man gathered his gear, slung his saddlebag over his shoulder, and left the shelter. As he walked through the wet grass to where the horses had been left, he observed that the rain had stopped.

"That's something," he told himself. "It would help if the clouds would blow away so we could have some moonlight or at least a little starlight in this black pocket of a canyon."

He spoke to Silver while he tightened the cinch. "We have a job to do, old fellow." The white horse nuzzled his shoulder.

Turning, he picked up the dangling reins of the girl's mustang and tied them to the saddle pommel so they would not drag.

"I'm going to depend on you," he told the wiry little animal, "to find that girl." He slapped the mustang's rump and said, "Get going."

The small horse tossed its head and trotted off into the darkness. The Lone Ranger stood ready to mount Silver and follow. He hesitated.

The sound he heard behind his back was very faint. It was barely audible above the noise of Wolf Creek. It was the slushing sound that a booted foot might make in mucky ground. The masked man started to turn when he felt a stunning blow land on the side of his head. A million stars danced in his brain, and then a brilliant flash of orange flame accompanied by the sharp crack of a gun exploded almost in his face. He felt his knees begin to buckle and he swayed to one side. He staggered to maintain his footing while he tried to fight down the giddiness that threatened to engulf him.

He was no more than half conscious when he felt hands behind his back gripping him by the shoulders and dragging him to the ground. He tried to lift his arms in self-defense, but they were too heavy. His muscles would not respond to the dictates of his whirling brain. He felt himself going down. It seemed as though the ground had given way beneath him. He felt himself falling and the fall seemed endless. It was like dropping into a pit that had no bottom—a pit where there was neither time nor substance—nothing but black oblivion.

The masked man's first awareness as he regained consciousness was a throbbing pain that began in the back of his head and reached forward to his temples. He lay on his back in soft mud beneath some kind of heavy weight. His right arm was folded across his chest beneath the weight. For a moment he lay quietly until the whirling sensation in his brain subsided.

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He tried to remember what had happened. There had been a blow as he stood ready to mount Silver. It had been a hard blow delivered from the rear. It might have cracked his skull had not some of its force been absorbed by his wide-brimmed white felt hat. There had been a flash of flame and an explosion. He remembered that. It had come at the instant he had turned toward the source of the blow.

"A gun," he told himself. "Someone fired a gun close to my face."

And then he understood the nature of the weight across his chest. It was a man.

The Lone Ranger mustered his strength to squirm from beneath the man on top of him and get to his feet. His legs at first were unsteady. He heard the nicker of a horse. And there stood Silver beside him. He clung to the saddle for support until his strength had returned. In the faint light he could see the still form on the ground.

"I wonder," he thought, "if that's the man who struck me."

He made sure his guns were still in place, then felt of the mask across his eyes before he crouched to examine the sprawling form. It was still too dark to make out the features of the man. There was nothing to do but wait. Slowly the floor of the canyon grew lighter.

Now he saw that the form at his feet was that of a heavily built man of middle age. He had a large mustache and a thick shock of hair, both of which were caked with mud. The masked man's heartbeat quickened when he saw a star-shaped badge of metal pinned to the left side of the stranger's shirt. There was a small, round hole in the center of the badge. It was too small to have been made by a bullet from a six gun. The Lone

Ranger guessed that a bullet from his .30--30 rifle would just about fit that hole. The shirt beneath the badge was stained with red. It was plain to see that a bullet from a

high-powered rifle had gone through the badge, the shirt, and the heart of a man who wore a sheriff's star!

CHAPTER SEVEN Reunion at Dawn

TONTO HAD MAINTAINED an all-night vigil just inside the wide mouth of the cave. He had sat in stoic silence, unmoving except for the occasional times when he had risen to add fuel to a brightly burning beacon fire.

The cave was halfway up a steeply sloping wall of rock that bounded the east side of Wild Horse Canyon.

The Indian had become increasingly worried since midnight. Allowing for all conceivable delays, he had calculated that the Lone Ranger would arrive by midnight at the very latest. In his estimate Tonto had taken into account the distance that had to be traveled, the rough nature of the ground, the storm, and even the flooded waters of Wolf Creek.

Long hours had passed since he had seen a column of smoke rise on a distant hill in response to his own smoke signals to the Lone Ranger. He knew that the masked man could find the cave in total darkness, but he had kept a bright fire going nevertheless.

The Lone Ranger might have been delayed until midnight, but now it was beginning to get light. The masked man was long hours overdue, and Tonto could account for the delay in only one way. Something had happened to the Lone Ranger or to Silver.

Tonto watched the dawn creep down into the canyon, though the floor still was enveloped in gray mist. The Indian decided to wait no longer. He would ride out in search of the masked man.

He extinguished the fire with water from two canteens, then brought his paint horse Scout from the rear of the cave. He fixed the saddle and bridle in place, then filled the saddlebags with food and supplies

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for an extended trip. When he had made a small, compact roll of his blankets and tied it in place behind the saddle, he was ready to set out.

The Indian let Scout pick his own way down the steep rocky slope. On the canyon floor, he guided Scout due south directly toward the place where Wolf Creek was spanned by a bridge.

The mist was thick and visibility was poor. Tonto didn't see the supporting posts where the bridge had been until he was within ten yards of them. He dismounted and snubbed Scout to one of the heavy timbers.

Leaving the horse, Tonto followed the bank downstream for quite a distance to look for hoof or boot marks. Finding none, he back traile, then went an equal distance upstream. He finally concluded that whatever had delayed his masked friend must have happened on the west side of the creek. There was no indication on the bank of the stream that either the Lone Ranger or Silver had crossed die swollen waters.

The rising sun had caused the mist to thin considerably by the time Tonto had returned to Scout. Now he could see the western shore of the creek quite clearly. He could even see the trees some distance away, and the mountain named Old Baldy rising behind them. But it was something else that caught and held his attention. It was a pyramidal tent made tepee fashion. Tonto recognized the tarpaulin by an L-shaped patch that he himself had sewn in place.

Without a moment's hesitation, the Indian leaped to Scout's back and heeled his horse straight into the stream. The current had subsided somewhat. The stream was still swift and deep, but it was no longer lashed by the wind. Though Tonto and the horse were carried downstream for some distance, the crossing was uneventful.

Tonto rode back to the wigwam and dismounted. He didn't expect to find anyone

inside. The Lone Ranger would have heard Scout's hoofs and would have come out to meet his Indian friend. Moreover, Silver was nowhere to be seen.

"Mebbe," Tonto told himself, "Lone Ranger leave note inside. Me look."

Tonto stuck his head inside the tarpaulin shelter. His eyes darkened when he saw a man sprawled face down on the ground. The man's head was concealed by a broad-brimmed hat. There was a ragged hole through the back of his shirt directly below the left shoulder blade. Saddlebags and other gear which Tonto recognized as the property of the Lone Ranger lay on the ground beside the body.

At first Tonto thought it was his friend who lay dead on the ground. He was greatly relieved when he turned the body over to learn that it was not the masked man, but a lawman, who had died with a bullet through his heart.

Seeing that the sheriff was beyond all help, Tonto made a thorough examination of the inside of the shelter and then of the ground which surrounded it. There were many footprints in the mud and grass. The Indian found several which he recognized as those of the Lone Ranger. He found prints which might have been made by the dead man in the tent, and there were smaller indentations that only the boots of a woman could have made. But there were prints of other men as well.

Tonto was trying to pick out the tracks of Silver from those of other horses when he heard a ringing voice: "Come on, Silver!"

It came from the north. A moment later Tonto saw his friend the masked man astride the snow-white stallion breaking into the clearing from the trees a hundred yards away. He was not alone. Behind him on Silver Tonto saw a girl. She looked travel-worn and weary as she slid to the ground.

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"This is Tonto," the Lone Ranger said simply.

"Your friend?"

"Yes."

For a moment there was a look of interest in the girl's tired face. Her lips parted as if she were about to speak, but she said nothing. Turning, she glanced toward the tent.

"I told you about the man in there," the Lone Ranger said.

The girl nodded silently.

"You may not care to go inside while I talk to Tonto."

"I—I don't mind," the girl said as she moved toward the tent and went within.

Tonto and his masked friend shook hands.

"Me wait in cave," the Indian said. "You not come. Me come look for you."

"I'm glad you're here, Tonto. I have a lot to tell you. But first we're going to see about breakfast."

Tonto nodded agreeably. He gestured toward the tent. "Me see feller in there."

"He's dead."

"Me know that."

The Lone Ranger said, "I'll tell you all I know while we're eating."

The masked man and Tonto worked together to build a suitable cooking fire and started to prepare a satisfying breakfast of crisp bacon, hot biscuits, and fragrant coffee. The girl came from the tent to set out tin cups and plates while the food was being cooked. As the two men and the girl ate, the Lone Ranger told Tonto the events of the night. When his narrative reached the point where he had found both the girl and his rifle gone, he turned to her and said, "I knew you had no horse. You couldn't travel far on foot, so I decided to go looking for you."

"Because I told you I was a fugitive?"

The Lone Ranger shook his head. "Not because of that," he said.

"Because," continued the girl, "you thought I had stolen your rifle?"

"No."

"Well, I didn't steal your rifle."

"So you told me."

Tonto broke in with a question. "What about lawman?" he said, gesturing toward the tarpaulin tepee with his thumb.

"I was just about to mount Silver," the masked man said, "when someone struck me from behind. Just as I turned, there was a shot and then I went down. I lost consciousness for a moment. When I came to, the body of the sheriff was on top of me. I took the body into the tent, then went in search of you." The Lone Ranger nodded at the girl. "It was too dark to follow footprints, and I had no idea where to look."

"He found me," the girl explained to Tonto, "in the woods north of here. He persuaded me to come back." She smiled gamely. "The promise of something to eat and a cup of hot coffee was more than I could resist."

Tonto nodded silently.

"I—I'm afraid you don't know anything about me," she continued to the Lone Ranger. "You don't even know my name."

"What is your name?"

"Marberry. Betty Marberry."

The Lone Ranger turned quickly when he heard Tonto mutter a low exclamation. "What's the matter, Tonto?" he demanded.

Tonto pointed at the girl. "Marberry," he repeated.

"What about it?"

Tonto said, "There plenty danger."

"Your Indian friend is right about that," Betty Marberry said. "I left a note to tell you I was a fugitive."

"I saw your note."

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"There—there is so much to tell you—I hardly know where to begin."

The Lone Ranger said, "A moment ago you spoke of my rifle."

Betty Marberry nodded and said, "I didn't take it."

"Someone did."

The girl said, "Yes, I know. I think I had better tell you everything."

"Tell me about the men who were pursuing you last night."

"The story begins long before last night. Does my name mean anything to you?"

"Marberry?" the Lone Ranger said. He thought for a moment, then shook his head slowly. "I don't think I've ever heard it before."

"Me hear-um name," broke in Tonto. Then, pointing to Betty Marberry, he said, "Because of girl, me send smoke signal—tell you come here fast."

"You mean to say, Tonto, that you sent for me because of this girl?"

Tonto nodded emphatically. "That right."

To Betty, the masked man said, "Let's hear your story."



CHAPTER EIGHT

The Frame-up

BETTY MARBEKRY sipped coffee from a tin cup while she studied the face of the Lone Ranger, as much as she could see of it, below his mask. Her eyes were frankly appraising as she looked into the steady, clear eyes that showed through the mask. She liked the firmness of the masked man's mouth, and the clean-cut line of his chin. Last night she had sensed an intangible quality that told her this man might be trusted. Now, in daylight, there was no reason to revise her opinion. She decided to trust the*masked man without reservation.

"You were going to tell us about yourself," the Lone Ranger said gently, after a long silence.

Betty nodded and said, "I'll start from the beginning. My father and mother lived in St. Louis. I was born there and grew up there. My uncle, my father's brother, came to visit us one day. He told about people who had found gold and silver in the West, and persuaded my father to sell out his small grocery business and try his luck at prospecting.

"It took a great deal of persuasion, but finally Uncle Ben had his way. As soon as Father could get his affairs in order, he and his brother came out here to Colorado."

"Leaving you and your mother in St. Louis?" asked the Lone Ranger.

"Yes. We heard very little from Dad. His letters were few and far between. When he did write, he had nothing but discouragement and failure to report.

"The money from the sale of the grocery store ran out. Mother took a position teaching school, and I found work in a business office. Then, one day, Dad came home. We hadn't heard from him in some time, so we were, of course, very much surprised. Dad was terribly excited. He and Uncle Ben had made a great discovery."

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"Gold?"

"We didn't know. He hadn't written about his discovery because he was afraid his letter might go astray and then someone else would learn the secret of the cave."

"Cave?"

"Yes. Dad and his brother had found a cave."

"But your father wouldn't tell you what was in the cave?"

"Not at that time. You see, he and his brother had made an agreement. They had promised each other that neither would tell what was in the cave unless the other was present." The Lone Ranger nodded and said, "Go on."

"Uncle Ben had built a small shack near the cave. He stayed there while Dad came back to St. Louis to get Mother and me. He wanted us to leave at once, but Mother was ill. We couldn't leave St. Louis. There was nothing the doctors could do to help her. She grew more and more desperately ill, and finally died."

"I'm sorry," the masked man said in a sympathetic voice.

"She died without knowing what Dad and Uncle Ben had found."

"Then what did you do?"

"After the funeral, we sold the house and furniture and said good-bye to our friends in St. Louis. We came here to Colorado, to a town called Scottsville. Do you know where it is?"

"Yes. It's about ten miles southwest of here."

Betty Marberry nodded. "At Scottsville," she continued, "we bought horses and riding clothes, then we started north toward a mountain that is called Old Baldy."

Tonto lifted his eyes to scan the treeless peak that towered above the other hills west of Wolf Creek. "There Old Baldy," he observed.

"Father never finished the trip. He was riding ahead of me along a narrow ledge. His horse stumbled and fell into a ravine, and Dad fell with it. It took a long time to get down to where he had landed, but he was still alive when I reached his side. He was horribly injured. He was dying and he knew it. He had hung on, fighting for time to tell me the secret of the cave."

"He told it?"

"Yes. And then he died."

"Are you going to trust Tonto and me with that secret?"

"I must," replied Betty Marberry. "I couldn't tell you any part of the story without telling all of it. That is why I was so long in deciding to trust you. I—I had to be sure."

"Well try to deserve your confidence."

"Dad and Uncle Ben had found gold in that cave."

The Lone Ranger showed no surprise. He had expected something of this sort. "Much gold?" he inquired.

"That remains to be seen," replied the girl. "There must be a lot of it, though. Enough, at any rate, to make men kill to get it."

"Hadn't your uncle and your father staked a claim?"

"Not at that time. They knew that as soon as a claim was registered there would be hundreds, perhaps thousands, of people rushing here to stake other claims near by. They thought it best to work the claim for a while and explore their discovery to see which way the mother lode ran, so they could claim the richest part of the ground." "I didn't mean to interrupt you," the Lone Ranger said. "Please go on with your story."

"Father died in my arms at the bottom of the ravine. I didn't know what to do next. I didn't know where to turn, or where to go. I—I guess that's why I was willing to trust the stranger."

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"What stranger?"

"A man who happened to come riding through the ravine. He saw me there with my father, and he was very helpful. He dug a grave—and—well—he helped me."

"I understand," the Lone Ranger said softly.

"He made a little mound of stones and then asked how he could be of further service. I told him about Uncle Ben, who was living in a shack somewhere near a cave on the side of Old Baldy. The stranger said he knew of Uncle Ben and offered to take me to him. I—I was so terribly grateful that I told him about the gold."

Tonto frowned and muttered something in a voice too low to understand.

"I know it was foolish of me to tell so much," the girl explained, "but I felt that I had to confide in someone, and that man had been such a friend in need that I felt he could be trusted. It—it was a terrible mistake."

The Lone Ranger remembered the message that had been written on the flap of his saddlebag. "You said in your message that you were a fugitive," he reminded Betty.

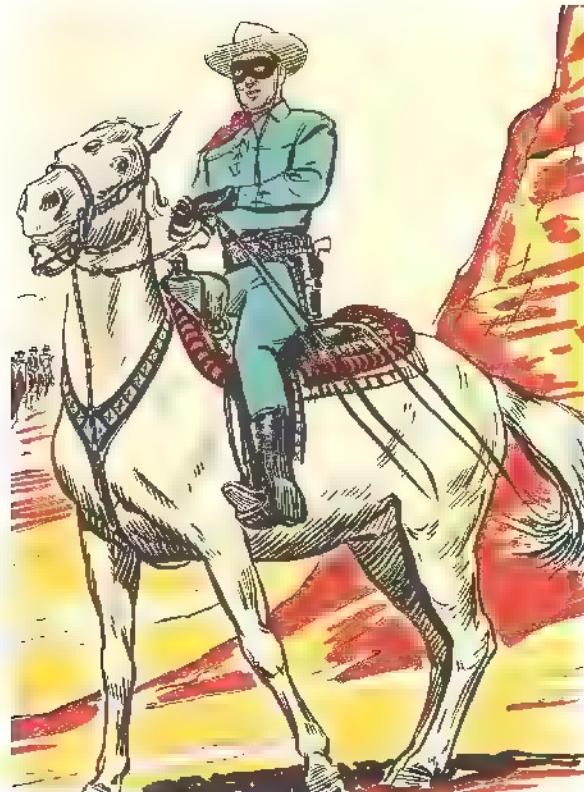
"That is true. I'm being hunted by the law—for murder. I'll get to that part of the story in just a moment.

"The stranger said his name was Smith. I was quite sure that was not his real name, but it didn't matter. I called him Mr. Smith and told him all about Uncle Ben, and our life in St. Louis, and about Dad's store—well, we talked about everything during the ride to the cave."

"Then he did take you there?"

"Yes, he took me right to Uncle Ben's cabin beside the cave and stayed while I finished telling all about the death of my mother, and about father coming West. Then Mr. Smith rode away.

"Later I told my uncle that I knew about the gold in the cave, and I told him



that I had foolishly mentioned it to Mr. Smith. Uncle Ben was very much upset about this. He decided that we had better stake out land and file a claim instead of waiting any longer. My uncle had done a considerable amount of investigating during the months since Dad had left him, and had a pretty fair idea of the choicest land.

"I remained in the cabin alone while he went into town and filed the necessary papers registering the claim in his name and mine. He was gone for several days. He returned late yesterday afternoon. "Last night, just before dark, a number of men rode up and dismounted in front of the shack. They burst through the door and one of them fired a shot. It killed Uncle Ben. I—I must have fainted because I don't remember anything after that until I found myself lying on a bunk with someone holding a wet cloth to my face.

"The room was full of men—not the ones who had come and shot Uncle Ben—different men. One of them was a sheriff.

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The others were deputies. The sheriff accused me of murdering my uncle."

"You!" exclaimed the Lone Ranger in surprise.

"Yes. I—at first I couldn't believe the sheriff was serious. I tried to tell him about the men who had come to the shack, but he wouldn't listen. He said he and his men had been riding in the vicinity and had heard a shot. They had rushed to the shack and found my uncle dead and me lying on the floor unconscious with the murder gun in my hand. He called it an open-and-shut case, and accused me of killing my own uncle so I'd own all the property instead of just half,

"There was nothing I could say, I watched for an opportunity and when it came, I ran to the door, mounted the nearest horse, and got away. The sheriff and his men came after me but I had a fairly good lead."

"That," said the Lone Ranger, "was when I saw you?"

"Yes. The wild horses must have stampeded through the canyon between me and the sheriff's men." The girl sighed. "That's all there is to it," she said. "That's the story. Now you know why I am a fugitive from justice.

"If you help me, you'll be in nearly as much trouble as I am."

"You saw the dead man in our tent."

"The sheriff?"

"The man who is wearing a sheriff's badge."

The girl nodded with a perceptible shudder. "I saw him."

"Is he the man who charged you with the murder of your uncle?"

"Yes."

"I don't think he was a sheriff."

"Not a sheriff!" exclaimed the girl in surprise. "But that badge—"

"Me talk," broke in Tonto. "Me got um plenty to say."

The masked man and the girl turned toward the Indian.

"Me send signal—ask you to come here," Tonto said to the Lone Ranger. "Me hear plenty talk of crooks. That why me send for you. Me hear talk by feller named Ripper Smith." Tonto asked Betty Marberry to describe the man who had called himself Mr. Smith. He nodded when the girl's description tallied with that of a notorious outlaw.

"It same man," Tonto said. "It Ripper Smith who help you bury your father. Me hear-um plenty talk of Ripper Smith." The Indian went on to explain how he had overheard certain men in the town of Scottsville. They were men who had been recruited by Ripper Smith to aid in stealing the gold claim on Old Baldy. When Tonto finished speaking, the Lone Ranger clarified the situation.

"Ripper Smith and his pals knew, now that your father was dead, that you would be the sole owner of the property after the death of your uncle. They planned to have you captured and held for murder. They figured that you would be glad to sign over your interest in the gold claim if they would help you to escape."

"That accounts for it!" Betty Marberry said. "That's why they framed me! But what about the sheriff and his men?"

"They were all part of the same gang—Ripper Smith's outfit. Ripper knew he couldn't kill you along with your uncle. That would have been simpler. But it wouldn't get him title to the claim. He was smart enough to know that you were worth more to him alive than dead, since the claim was registered in your name."

"You mean he wasn't a real sheriff!" she exclaimed.

"No." The Lone Ranger paused, then said, "There's just one more thing to clear up. Why did you leave the tent last night while I was looking for your horse? Was it

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really because you didn't want me to become an accessory after the fact in the murder of your uncle by helping you escape?"

"I'll be frank with you," the girl replied. "I ran away because I didn't trust anyone—not even you, despite the fact that you had rescued me from Wolf Creek."

"But you didn't take the rifle?"

Betty shook her head emphatically. "No," she said.

The Lone Ranger told again how he had been attacked the night before. He could only surmise what had happened. "As I see it," he said, "two of the outlaws came to the shelter just after you had left. They took my rifle, then withdrew into the darkness and waited for me to return. One of them struck me on the head—the other fired the rifle. The bullet may or may not have been meant for me. In either case, it killed the man who wore the badge, the impostor who was posing as a sheriff. Why they didn't kill me I can't understand. There must have been some reason for leaving me alive.

"The question is this," said the masked man. "What is our next move?"

"How do you know there were only two of them? There may have been more."

"I saw their tracks this morning," he replied.

The girl said, "Oh."

For some time the Lone Ranger sat in pondering silence.

At one time Betty was about to speak, but Tonto held his finger to his lips in a gesture for silence. The Lone Ranger finally spoke, but his voice was barely audible. It was as if he were merely thinking aloud. "One of those two men, the killer, got away," he said. "I have a plan—it might work. I wonder if I could get away with it."

Silence followed then for several moments, after which he said decisively, "The plan is worth a try!"

CHAPTER NINE

The Lone Ranger Plans a Move

BETTY MARBERRY watched die Lone Ranger place his cup and tin plate near the fire and then walk over to where Silver was standing. Then she turned to Tonto and asked, "What is your masked friend going to do?"

Tonto grinned and shook his head. "Me not know," he said. "Him got some kind of plan. Mebbe by 'm by him tell us."

The Lone Ranger's plan was one that called for boldness and daring. It would be perhaps the most hazardous of all his undertakings. Its success would depend on many things over which he himself would have no control. There were many risks, but they were calculated risks. There were several goals, all of which had to be attained in order to bring about a satisfactory solution to the problem of preventing the Ripper Smith gang from achieving its evil scheme.

During preparations for breakfast, the Lone Ranger had brought his saddlebags and other gear out of the tepee and had placed them on the ground near die place where he had left Silver at ground Hitch. Now he opened one of the saddlebags and selected a number of items, including a bottle which was filled with a dark brown liquid made from roots, herbs, and the bark of certain trees. It was a stain concocted by Tonto and used by the Lone Ranger when it was desirable to wear a disguise on his face instead of a mask.

There were several bottles of stain, each designed to simulate a different complexion. By using the stain in combination with other make-up and suitable clothing, the Lone Ranger had, in the past, appeared as an Indian, a Mexican, a weather-beaten prospector, and even as a pale-faced tenderfoot from east of the Mississippi. But he had never tried to look

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like any specific individual. Now he was going to try to duplicate the features of the man who lay dead in the shelter of the wig-wam. It would be a difficult undertaking, but he hoped to find his problem simplified by the fact that the dead man had a great shock of hair and a walrus mustache as well as shaggy, heavy eyebrows.

When he had assembled the make-up materials and a small mirror, he made his way into the shelter, throwing back one end of the tarpaulin to let the morning sunlight through the opening.

The dead man who wore the sheriff's badge lay face up on the ground just as Tonto had left him. The Lone Ranger propped up his mirror on a chunk of firewood and stepped back to study the features he was going to try to copy. There was something peculiar about the mustache. One side seemed considerably lower than the other. The Lone Ranger bent closer to examine it. He lifted one end, and the mustache came loose in his hand. "False!" he muttered, "A false mustache!" He chuckled softly. "This will make things easier. I'll wear the same mustache instead of trying to duplicate it."

He wondered about the dead man's thick black hair. Investigation soon proved that a wig covered a head of short, thin hair that was slicked down close to the head. The shaggy eyebrows, too, were false. It was an entirely different-looking individual who now lay on the ground. The face was that of a younger-looking man, whose features showed some evidence of grooming. It was the face of a man whom the Lone Ranger recognized from handbills. It was the face of the notorious outlaw known as Ripper Smith.

"This," the masked man told himself, "confirms one point. I suspected that this man was a crook and not a real lawman. Now I know it."

The next task was even more distasteful. The Lone Ranger stripped off the dead man's outer garments, leaving the perforated sheriff's badge still pinned to the shirt, and placed them on the ground. He wrapped the still form in a blanket, one corner of which he pulled down to expose the dead man's face. Seated on the ground in front of the propped-up mirror, the Lone Ranger removed his mask and went to work. He darkened the skin of his face, adding a few lines around the corners of the mouth with a sharply pointed make-up stick. He paused, and after studying Ripper Smith's features, pressed bits of sticky stuff behind his ears to push them slightly farther from his head. Ripper Smith had a small hump on the bridge of his nose. The Lone Ranger duplicated this hump with a bit of make-up putty on his own straight nose, then used more stain to darken the putty and blend it into his complexion.

He combed the caked mud out of the false eyebrows and the mustache and stuck them in place with spirit gum. Last of all he combed the wig and pulled it on over his head. The wig fitted perfectly.

He ripped a blanket into six-inch strips and wound these about his middle to make himself look heavier. One of his ivory-handled Colts he concealed between the layers of wool. The other he wore in its holster on his hip. When he had put on the dead man's clothing, he looked shorter and stockier than usual.

"This is as good as I can do," he said. "Let's hope it's good enough."

Betty Marberry uttered an involuntary cry of surprise and fear. "The sheriff!" she gasped, when the Lone Ranger stepped out of the shelter and walked toward the camp fire.

The resonant, well-modulated voice that replied was in contrast to the appearance of the man. "I'm glad," the Lone

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Ranger said, "that the disguise fooled you, even for a moment." "You—"

"I don't know what the voice of the dead man sounded like. Perhaps you can help me. Was it anything like mine?"

"No," Betty said emphatically, shaking her head. "It was thin and high-pitched!"

"I must try to imitate it." The Lone Ranger pitched his voice higher and made it thinner. "How is this?" he continued. "Is this more like it?"

"It's more like it, but it still is not the same. The man who called himself a sheriff seemed to talk through his nose."

The Lone Ranger spoke again, adding a nasal quality to his voice.

"I think that is more like it," Betty said.

"In that case, I shall continue talking this way while we are together. I need the practice."

"What are you going to do?" asked Betty.

"First of all, I'm going to ask you to look at the man inside the wigwam and tell me if you have ever seen him before."

"I saw him," she replied. "He looked just the way you do now."

"Please look again." "Very well, if you say so." Tonto and the Lone Ranger accompanied the girl to the opening of the tent, then stood back while she eyed the figure in the blanket.

"It's a different man!" she cried. "It's Mr. Smith!"

"It's not a different man," the Lone Ranger put in. "It's the same man. He was disguised just as I am now."

"But that—that man," Betty pointed, "is the one I met in the ravine!"

"The one you told about the gold mine?"

"Yes, it's the same man."

Tonto said, "That Ripper Smith. His leader of outlaws."

"That's right, Tonto," the Lone Ranger nodded. "And now, outlaw or no outlaw, we've got to give him a decent burial."

Betty stayed by the tepee while the two men carried the blanket-wrapped figure across the clearing and dug a shallow grave under the trees. When their grim duty was accomplished they returned to the wigwam, where Tonto stowed away the short-handled shovel he had taken from his gear.

"Him planted," the Indian observed stolidly. He paused, then said, "What you do now?"

"I'm going to join those outlaws," replied the Lone Ranger. "By this time they have heard from the man who stole my gun. They probably think Ripper Smith is dead. It's going to be my job to convince them that he's not."

Tonto pointed to the hole in the star-shaped badge. "How you explain that?" he asked.

"I have a thick notebook, Tonto. You remember it. It stopped a bullet once."

Tonto nodded. "Me remember," he said.

"I'll stick that in the pocket of this shirt beneath the badge. I'll try to make those crooks think that the badge and the book took the force out of the bullet."

"But what about the bloodstains?" Betty Marberry demanded. "And the hole in the back of your shirt? You'll have to account for those."

"The notebook didn't wholly stop the bullet," said the Lone Ranger, "but it deflected it and took out much of the force, so the wound was little more than a scratch." He found the notebook in his saddlebag and showed it to the girl. It bore a brown stain that once had been red. "My own clothing," he went on, "was stained just about as much as this shirt when that happened."

Betty shook her head. "You may be able to get away with it," she said dubiously,

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"but if they see that bullet hole in the back of your shirt—"

"I'm not going to turn my back on those killers. I'll be with them only long enough to get the evidence we need. In the meantime, you two are to cut over the mountains to Scottsville, and get the real sheriff. You know him, don't you, Tonto?"

The Indian nodded and said, "Him name Grant."

"Sheriff Grant. That's right, Tonto. Tell him to get a good-sized posse. Betty will lead the way to the cave. Meanwhile, I'll try to keep those desperados from starting a search for her."

"But I have no horse," broke in Betty Marberry. "I told you that I had taken a horse belonging to those outlaws. It probably has returned to them."

"You ride double with Tonto. You can get another horse in Scottsville."

"Very well."

"You two get going, and I'll start for the cave on Old Baldy. And remember, you'll have to be watchful. Ripper Smith's gang have probably been out since daybreak looking for Betty. They can't afford to lose her. They cannot get the gold mine without her signature on the quit claim. What good will it do them to accuse her of murder and then not be able to find her? So, Tonto," he said, turning to his Indian friend, "I'm counting on you to keep her from falling into their hands."

"Me take care girl," Tonto replied.

CHAPTER TEN Captured

THE LONE RANGER was the first to leave the camp. Betty Marberry and Tonto watched him ride south until he disappeared in a dense growth of trees.

Tonto rinsed the dishes and utensils that had been used at breakfast, then watered down the fire until no spark remained. He

piled his saddlebags, blankets, and spare clothing near the tepee so his horse would have no unnecessary weight to carry. "Now," he said, "we ready to ride for sheriff." The girl nodded. There were tired lines in her face. She had gone long hours without sleep, and those hours had been filled with excitement, danger, and strenuous activity. "Are you sure," she asked, "that your horse can carry both of us as far as Scottsville?"

"Scout carry us," replied the Indian confidently. "You might make better time without me." Tonto detected a wistful note in Betty's voice. "I could stay here," she continued, "if you think you could find the cave." Tonto shook his head firmly. "You not safe here," he said.

Tonto knew that she did not relish the thought of a hard ride over the crest of the mountain range, but he dared not leave her behind. She might be found and re-captured by the Ripper Smith gang.

That the gang would carry on without their leader, there could be no doubt. They would search for the girl until they found her.

Betty sighed and shrugged her shoulders. "I'm to ride behind the saddle?" she asked.

Tonto nodded and gave her a hand up.

Scout didn't seem to mind the double burden. He moved easily, lifting his hoofs high as he trotted forward.

Tonto guided the paint horse at an angle to the right of the route taken by the Lone Ranger. He planned to give Old Baldy a wide berth to minimize the risk of running into some of the outlaws. The ground was level until Scout reached the woods.

There something occurred that changed the Indian's plans.

Suddenly there came the sharp crack of a high-powered rifle fired from close at hand.

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A snarling voice cried out, "Pull in that horse!"

"Whoa," called Tonto, drawing in the reins.

Scout had barely halted when two men holding rifles stepped from behind a tree.

"That first shot," the snarling voice went on, "was just a warning. If we fire again, someone will die."

The man who spoke was short and barrel-chested. He had the short, thick neck, the jutting jaw, and the long arms of a gorilla. His mouth was twisted to a permanent sneer by the scar left by a knife wound on one side of his pock-marked face.

The other man was tall and so lean that he looked emaciated. His cheekbones stuck out prominently, and his eyes seemed to be at the end of dark tunnels beneath a broad, overhanging forehead.

The scar-faced man was grinning. "Thought you'd get away from us, eh? Well, we fooled you, sure enough," he said gloatingly. He addressed his remark to the girl. "The boss was downright worried about you," he continued. "He'll be real glad to see you back."

Betty shuddered at the thought. She clung tightly to Tonto, who had neither spoken nor changed his expression.

The tall man spoke for the first time. "Get down," he ordered curtly.

"We do what they say," Tonto told the girl.

"I—I guess we have no choice."

Both men held their guns in readiness to fire at the slightest sign of a hostile move.

"Rope 'em," the tall man said, when Betty stood beside the horse at Tonto's side.

"The boss didn't say anythin' about bringin' in any Injun," argued the short man with the scar. "All he wants is the girl. Why don't we put a bullet through the redskin an' let it go at that?"

"You heard what I said, Scar," the tall man spoke in a level voice. "Rope 'em."

"All right, all right, Tombstone. I'll rope 'em."

"There's a rope on the Indian's saddle," said the somber-faced individual. "I'll keep 'em covered while you tie their hands."

The man called Scar took Tonto's rope from the saddle and uncoiled it. Drawing a knife from his boot he cut off two lengths of the stout line and dropped the remainder of the lariat on the ground. Meanwhile the tall man's eyes shifted constantly from Tonto to the girl and back again. Otherwise he was still. His emotionless face, his deep-set eyes, and his parchment-colored skin gave him the appearance of a dead man. The nickname "Tombstone" fitted him perfectly.

Scar knew how to handle a rope. He grabbed Tonto's hands and crossed them at the wrists. With a few deft motions he wound the wrists in several turns of rope and tied two knots.

"That'll hold you for a little while," he said. Taking the other length of rope, he stepped to Betty Marberry. While he tied the girl, he kept up a running line of talk.

"The boys will sure be surprised when we get back to the cave with an Indian an' a paint horse in tow. They got the impression in the lightnin' last night that the critter in this canyon was a white man ridin' a white horse. That just goes to show you how lightnin' changes the look of things. Why, I remember one time—"

"Shut up, Scar," cut in the thin man. "Get that girl tied an' be quick about it."

"Aw, what's your hurry, Tombstone? I'm not wastin' any time."

Taking her cue from Tonto, Betty submitted to the roping without a struggle. Tonto must have realized that submission, at least for the present, was the wiser course. Resistance would be hopeless with

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Tombstone watching their slightest move so closely.

"Y'know, Tombstone," Scar said after a slight pause, "I was just thinkin'. With the Ripper dead, things are likely to be different."

"Why?" demanded Tombstone. "Bart Benson has a different way of doin' things. He's direct an' straightforward. He don't go in for all the fancy touches like the Ripper did."

The rope was tight on Betty's wrists. It cut into her tender skin and hurt, but she gritted her teeth and stifled a gasp of pain. She was determined to be as game as possible.

Scar tied a final knot and stepped back.

"I tried to tell Ripper Smith that he was wastin' time," he went on conversationally. "I told him that, when he first started talkin' about his plan to get the gold mine. I said it was a lot of nonsense to go to all the trouble of makin' the girl think she was arrested for the murder of that old man, an' offer to help her escape if she'd sign over her gold claim. But Ripper wasn't the kind of man to listen to advice. He liked the idea of gettin' himself tricked out in false hair an' a sheriffs badge, an' posin' as a lawman."

The outlaw grinned crookedly at Betty. "You're learnin' things, ain't you, Miss Marberry? I reckon you must be plenty surprised to hear that it wasn't a real sheriff that tried to arrest you for your uncle's murder. I'll bet you never suspicioned that it was Ripper Smith all the time who was tricked out like the sheriff." Betty made no reply. Scar didn't wait for one.

"Wait till you see how Bart does things," he said. "He'll just hand out a paper that'll give the gold mine to us, an' he'll say, 'Sign it!' That's all he'll do. You won't sign it right away, but you'll sure wish you had. Bart will begin doin' things to make you

change your mind, an' the longer it takes you to change it, the worse it'll be. You'll be downright amazed at the things Bart Benson can think of to make a person do what he wants. I never in all my life saw a man with so many ideas as Bart Benson has."

Tonto was listening to every word, and his hopes were sinking lower all the time. The outlaws knew that their leader had been killed. They had already chosen a new leader, one whom Scar, at least, seemed to prefer to Ripper Smith. Perhaps the Lone Ranger had been wrong in his understanding of the shooting. He had thought that Ripper Smith was shot by accident. It might not have been an accident after all. The shooting might have been intentional.

Scar must have been thinking along the same line, for in the next moment he said, "I wonder if Ripper was shot by accident or on purpose?"

"Watch what you say," warned Tombstone.

"I can't help what I think," replied the short man. "Bart an' Ripper were together in the canyon. There wasn't anyone else around. Bart wanted to be the leader of our outfit. He's wanted that for a long time."

"He said it was an accident. He told us he fired when the man he'd struck on the head tried to turn."

Scar grinned. "That's what Benson says. How do we know it's the truth? If Bart had wanted to kill that Injun, he could have done it without no trouble. He didn't kill him, though, he left him alive. Instead he killed Ripper Smith."

Tombstone said, "You'd better keep such notions to yourself. If Benson hears you talk like that, hell get mighty rough with you."

Tonto and Betty were learning things. Bart Benson was the man who had attacked the Lone Ranger and taken his rifle. Obviously the men knew nothing about the Lone Ranger. What would happen when he

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appeared in the disguise that Ripper Smith had worn?

"We'd better be gettin' back to the cave," decided Tombstone. "We'll take the short cut an' be there in half an hour."

"Half an hour!" exclaimed Betty in surprise. She hadn't meant to open her mouth. It was an involuntary exclamation.

"Surprised?" grinned Scar. "Maybe we know that cave better'n you do. There's a secret entrance that's a lot nearer than die one your uncle found. It's just half an hour from here."

Betty realized then that she and Tonto would reach the cave ahead of the Lone Ranger. They would be there when he arrived in the role of Ripper Smith disguised as sheriff. They would be witnesses to all that happened to him. The slim girl shuddered at the thought.

CHAPTER ELEVEN The Uphill Ride

THE LITTLE-USUED trail up the east side of Old Baldy was barely discernible. It was very narrow and had been cut through tangled underbrush that raked the horses and their riders. The scar-faced man went first to show the way while Tombstone, his rifle held in readiness in his right hand, followed Tonto's paint horse and its double burden.

Betty Marberry rode in the saddle, clutching the pommel with her hands tied together at the wrists. Tonto rode behind the girl. His hands, too, were tied, and at times it was difficult to keep his balance. Scar seemed to be in no hurry to reach the secret entrance to the cave. He let his horse set its own gait on the narrow uphill trail.

The prisoners had not been gagged. Their captors didn't seem to mind if they conversed.

"You not know of second entrance to cave?" asked Tonto. "Father didn't tell me there was more than one entrance," the girl

replied over her shoulder. "Uncle Ben didn't tell me about any other, either."

Tonto said, "We go up eastern slope of mountain."

"Uncle Ben's shack is on the southern slope. It's right near the mouth of the cave. Have you ever seen that cave, Tonto?"

The Indian shook his head, then realizing that the girl in front could not see the gesture, said, "No."

"It's a huge place. Shall I tell you about it?"

Tonto grunted affirmation.

"The entrance," began Betty, "is eight or ten feet wide and high enough so a man can ride in on horseback without ducking. There's a big room just inside the entrance."

"How big?"

"Oh, I should judge it's nearly a hundred feet across that room and the ceiling is at least twenty-five or thirty feet high."

"What shape is big room?"

"More or less round. It's irregular, of course, but as I remember it, it was fairly round. I couldn't see clearly because it is so dark in there. Uncle Ben and I carried lanterns when we looked it over."

Thinking of the secret entrance, Tonto asked, "You not see tunnel from big room?"

"Oh, there are a lot of tunnels. The stone walls of the big room are practically honeycombed with openings. Some of them are small and some are large."

Betty described the condition of the walls in much detail. The strata of rock inside the cave were perpendicular instead of horizontal. This was a common condition throughout the Rocky Mountain region. During some prehistoric age, when the mountains were being formed, there were repeated upheavals of the earth's crust. The Rocky Mountains were a result of such an

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upheaval. Huge layers of rock had been upended and great fissures had appeared between the layers. There were many of these fissures in the walls of the cave. Some were only inches wide, but others reached a width of several feet.

"Uncle Ben and I," the girl continued, "walked into a number of those tunnels for a little ways. I don't know how many of them Uncle Ben had explored before I joined him. I don't think he could have explored them all."

"Him there," Tonto said, "for long time."

"Even so, I doubt if he had time enough to thoroughly investigate all the tunnels that lead out of that big room. Anyway, he didn't tell me that any of them led to the other side of the mountain. But apparently at least one of them does, if these outlaws know of a second entrance to the cave." Tonto asked a number of questions about the walls of the cave, also the floor and the ceiling. Betty answered to the best of her ability, not knowing whether the Indian was seeking information or merely talking to alleviate the tension and discomfort of the trip.

Presently Scar reined in his horse, called to the others to halt, and dismounted.

"Here's where we go inside the mountain," he announced.

Betty Marberry and Tonto looked around but saw no sign of any opening.

"Pretty well hidden, ain't it?" grinned Scar. "You just follow me. Leave your horse right here. It will be taken care of."

Tonto hesitated. He had been marking time awaiting a favorable opportunity to make a sudden bid for freedom. So far there had been no such opportunity. Every move he made had been closely watched by Tombstone. At no time had the cadaverous-looking man come close enough for Tonto to attack him. Such an attack would have been extremely hazardous

with Tonto's hands tied as they were, but given the chance, he had intended to try it. "Go on," said Tombstone, from five paces back. "Follow Scar."

There was nothing else to do. Refusal, Tonto knew, would be quite futile. Now he wished that he had acted differently. He wished that he had snatched his gun and put up a fight at the risk of getting shot when Scar and Tombstone first had halted his horse on the trail. But that chance was gone. Resistance at this point could gain absolutely nothing and would probably result in disaster. He followed Scar around a dense stand of brushwood which effectively concealed a crevice in Old Baldy's rocky wall.

Betty followed, murmuring, "There should be words chiseled in the rock above this hole: 'All hope abandon, ye who enter here.'

CHAPTER TWELVE In Enemy Hands

THE LONE RANGER had only a general idea concerning the location of Ben Marberry's cabin and the entrance to the cave on the flank of Old Baldy. He guided Silver through the trees, following as straight a course as possible, while he made his way up the southern slope of the mountain. After nearly an hour of riding, the woods thinned out and the sun beat down hotly. The false mustache and wig became increasingly uncomfortable. The padding that concealed the outline of the gun beneath his shirt was galling. Perspiration formed in beads on the stain that darkened his complexion.

Presently he saw the shack. It hugged the mountainside close to a black opening that apparently was the entrance to the cave. There was no sign of life in the vicinity. No smoke came from the stovepipe that poked through the roof of the cabin. The

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door stood wide open, and a slight breeze stirred the curtains, symbols of a woman's occupancy, inside the open windows. The Lone Ranger saw neither men nor horses.

Approaching nearer, he looked through the open doorway and saw that the shack was bare. Aside from the window curtains, there was nothing to indicate that it ever had been occupied. The furniture, if there ever had been any, was gone. The Lone Ranger wondered if all his plans and his elaborate disguise were to be in vain. Perhaps the gang had left the vicinity after the escape of Betty Marberry.

"On the other hand," he told himself, "they may have moved the furniture into the cave. I don't know what else they would do with it. It would hardly be worth while carrying it away for its intrinsic value."

He dismounted and tossed the reins over Silver's head, leaving them to dangle on the ground. Reminding himself that he must speak in the voice of Ripper Smith, he walked boldly into the cave,

A man sat in the shade just inside the entrance. His bentwood chair was tilted back against the rock wall and his thumbs were hooked in the armholes of his vest. He seemed to be half asleep. Then as the bushy-haired newcomer came forward, the man's pale eyes snapped open. His chair came down with a bang and with a quick, lithe movement he was on his feet. There was no concealing his surprise.

The Lone Ranger recognized the guard from pictures he had seen on handbills in other states. There could be no mistaking the narrow, ferret like face, the receding chin, and the small mouth with lips so thin that they were almost nonexistent. It was Bart Benson. Probably Colorado was one of the few western states left that was not yet too hot to hold him.

Remembering that he had to act the role of Ripper Smith, the leader of the gang, the Lone Ranger nodded curtly and said in a

high-pitched voice, "Surprised to see me, Bart?"

Benson's eyes moved up and down studying the Lone Ranger from head to foot before he spoke. "Why should I be surprised?" he asked.

The Lone Ranger pointed to the bullet hole in the sheriff's badge. "Nearly got it last night."

"Nearly?" the inflection in Benson's voice made the single word a question.

Grinning as he imagined Ripper Smith might have grinned, the Lone Ranger drew from his shirt pocket a bloodstained notebook, many pages of which were drilled and ripped. "If it hadn't been for this notebook," he explained, "I might not be here now. Where are all the boys?" he asked as he put the notebook back into a pocket.

Benson gestured with his thumb to the interior of the big cavern. "Look around," he said.

A quick glance told the Lone Ranger that there were about a dozen men engaged in various activities inside the cavern. Some were playing cards by lantern light, using chairs and a table that probably had come from the shack. Others, farther removed from the entrance, were cleaning pistols and rifles. On the opposite side of the cave another lantern burned. Its light revealed a row of horses and two men who were working on the animals with brushes. In the semidarkness, apart from everyone else, several men lay on blankets. One occupied a bunk; the others lay on the ground.

Benson drew a clasp knife from his pocket. He opened the five-inch blade and started working on his fingernails.

"I note," he said casually, "that you came up here on a different horse."

"That horse belongs to the man who got slugged at the same time that a bullet drilled this badge."

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"Um-hum," Benson replied without looking up. "So you had a narrow escape, eh?"

"That's right. Now we're going to change a few plans."

At this Bart Benson raised his light-blue eyes. "Are we?" he asked.

"I want everyone in the gang to assemble right here. Then I'll tell you what the next move is."

Benson rose to his feet and called to the others in the cavern. "Did you hear that, boys? You're wanted out here, so come on."

The men in the cave had been watching Bart Benson and the newcomer tensely. They left the cards and horses, and those who had been lying down got up from their blankets. The Lone Ranger recognized a number of men in the group who were wanted by the law for various crimes.

Benson was speaking again. "The hairy gent here said he wanted everyone in the gang assembled so he could tell you what the next move is."

There were assorted murmurs from the men. Benson turned toward the Lone Ranger. "The men are all here," he said, "but you're not going to have anythin' to say about the next move."

Benson's manner was mild, but there was something in his tone that told the Lone Ranger a showdown was close at hand. So Benson knew that he was not Ripper Smith! Perhaps the death of Smith had been premeditated murder after all, so that Benson could take over the leadership of the outfit. That being the case, the cold-eyed outlaw, to prevent his men from thinking Smith alive, might commit another murder. While these thoughts raced through the Lone Ranger's mind his eyes took in as many of the surrounding details as possible. Then he saw something he hadn't noticed. It was a rifle that lay on the floor beside the chair that Benson had been using. He recognized

it as his own rifle. It had been concealed until the outlaw rose from his chair.

The Lone Ranger decided that inasmuch as he wanted these men to believe that he was Ripper Smith, he would have to act convincingly. "What do you mean by that remark, Bart?" he demanded. "Why won't I have anything to say about the next move? Who's the leader of this outfit?"

"Now, now," said Benson calmly as he reached out and started to finger the sheriff's badge, "there's no need to flare up like that. I'm curious about this badge. Who was with you when you collected that bullet hole, Smith?"

The Lone Ranger thought fast. His rifle had been stolen by the man who had been with Ripper Smith and Benson had the rifle. Without any apparent hesitation he said, "You were with me, Benson. What's the matter? Your memory gone back on you? We were together when you stole a rifle from the tent near the creek."

Benson pursed his lips.

The Lone Ranger took an aggressive attitude. "That reminds me! There's a little matter that you and I are going to settle. I want to know whether that bullet struck me accidentally or on purpose. If I thought you had intended to kill me—"

Benson grinned and held up one hand. "Stop it," he said. "You're putting up a pretty good bluff. You look like Ripper Smith did when he wore the sheriff's clothes. You even sound like Ripper Smith. But you're not Ripper Smith!"

"I'm not? Who in blazes do you think I am?" The Lone Ranger spoke in the hope of covering his sudden move. He stepped back quickly and dropped his hand to his gun but he had no chance to draw. Bart Benson's voice cracked like a whip. "Take him, boys!"

The men had moved even as their leader spoke. Two grabbed the Lone Ranger by the arms and a third clamped a firm grip

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on his gun hand. "I'll take the gun," this man said.

The Lone Ranger tried to jerk free. He was too tightly held. Realizing that he had no chance of escape against such odds, he stood quietly. He would conserve his strength for a later effort.

Benson's soft laugh was taunting. "You wanted to know if that badge was drilled by accident or on purpose," he said. "Well, I'll tell you. It was no accident. I shot Ripper Smith because me an' the rest of the boys didn't like his way of doin' things. We're goin' to do things different from now on." The Lone Ranger made no comment. "You asked," continued the outlaw, "who I thought you were. Well, I might make a couple of guesses. First of all, I'd say you were the gent who built that tepee near the creek. Second, I'd say you were the one who owned a mighty fine rifle that I've taken charge of. Third, I reckon you're the hombre who rescued the Marberry heifer from the flood. I saw the note she left for you on the flap of your saddlebag.

"I suppose you're askin' yourself how I knew right away you weren't Ripper Smith. I'll tell you that, too. I knew Ripper Smith was dead because after I shot him, I examined him to make sure. Now wouldn't you like to know just what happened down there near the creek last night?"

"If you're in a talking mood, Benson, go ahead and talk."

"Yeah," Benson replied. "I'm in a talkin' mood. I'll go right ahead an' talk, an' then you'll know exactly where you stand."

The Lone Ranger hoped that Benson would talk a long time. It had been his hope that he might, by posing as the leader of the outlaws, get the crooks assembled in a poor position to make a stand against the law when the sheriff and a posse arrived. Now this plan had failed. He could only stall for time and hope that Tonto would bring Sheriff Grant and some deputies very soon.

"I'm waiting, Benson."

"You seem to be pretty familiar with my name,"

"I've seen your face on handbills in at least three states."

Benson grinned at his men. "You see, boys," he said, "I'm famous. Colorado don't know yet who they got for a visitor. But this gent knows me by the handbills."

There was a general laugh at this.

"Me an' Ripper Smith were lookin' for the Marberry girl," said Benson. "It was a tough job in that storm. We saw that tent you fixed up an' headed for it. When we got there it was empty, but there was a fire goin' inside. That's when we found your gear an' the rifle. I helped myself to the rifle, as you know. Then we heard some hoof beats an' ducked out of the tent, figurin' maybe it was you comin' back. It was you all right, an' you had an extra horse with you. It was our mustang that the girl had escaped on. We watched our chance, crept close, an' Ripper let you have a crack on the head. Then I shot Ripper."

Benson continued speaking. "I made sure he was dead, an' I was just about to put a bullet into your head, when I had a better idea. I figured that you'd be no good to me dead, but you'd be plenty useful if you were alive. I left you there, beneath Ripper's dead body an' went to find a couple of the boys to carry you. When we got back, Smith's body had been dragged inside the tent, an' you were gone. I don't know where you went, but I'd guess you went in search of the Marberry critter. Now if you got any questions, I'll be glad to gratify your curiosity." Benson finished his speech with a bow of mock courtesy.

The Lone Ranger spoke slowly in order to use up as much time as possible. "I've heard a lot about you, Ben-son," he said in his normal voice. "You don't often let a man live, if there's any excuse to kill him. I can't help wondering why I am still alive."

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"I told you, mister. You're going to be useful to me." "If you think I'd join your gang—"

"Uh-uh," grinned Benson, shaking his head. "I wouldn't want you in my outfit."

"Then how can I be of use to you?"

"I don't know how well acquainted you an' the Marberry girl are, but she seems to think pretty much of you."

"What gave you that idea?"

"The message on the flap of your saddlebag. She didn't want you to get into trouble with the law by aidin' a fugitive from justice. I figure that if she would run off on her own in a storm like last night just so's you wouldn't get into trouble, she'd do a lot more to save your life."

"Save my life?"

Benson nodded. "That's what I said. She probably told you about a gold claim."

"The one that you are trying to steal from her!"

"There's no use denyin' that," agreed Bart Benson. "I want her to sign over that claim to me. I think she'll do it quicker to save you from torture than she would to save herself. We'll soon find out."

"First," challenged the Lone Ranger, "you'll have to find her."

"We've got her," announced Bart Benson simply.

The Lone Ranger must have looked incredulous because Benson added, "You'll see her in a little while, after you've seen the sheriff."

"Sheriff Grant?" exclaimed the captive.

"Sure thing," grinned Benson. "He's here, too. How'd you think we got his gun an' badge, an' clothes?"

The Lone Ranger tried to conceal the feeling of utter despair that swept over him at hearing this stunning information. Now there was no hope of rescue. Had Tonto, too, been captured? There was a probability,

Tonto had been with Betty. He would have been captured with her.

"Have you killed the sheriff?" the Lone Ranger asked.

"No," replied Bart Benson, "we haven't quite killed him. He's still alive, but there's no tellin' how long he'll stay that way. Take off the wig, boys," he ordered. "Also the fake mustache an' eyebrows. Last night I noticed he was wearin' a mask. I didn't bother to look under it because it was too dark to see much of his face. Well have a look now. Maybe he's someone we know." The Lone Ranger stood quietly while the false hair was removed. He was grateful for the fact that his true features had been changed by make-up. He still had one of his ivory-handled guns, but this was underneath a layer of padding inside his shirt. It would take time to get it out. For the present he would have to submit to capture.

Benson was speaking. "Have any of you boys ever seen this gent before?" There was a ragged chorus of no's.

"Never mind. It don't matter. Keep a close watch on him an' take him to the sheriff. I want him to see what's happened to the lawman. Then maybe he'll know what's in store for him or anyone else who tries to put anything over on Bart Benson!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN A Bid for Freedom

IN ADDITION to the fact that the odds were heavy against him, there was another reason why the Lone Ranger submitted so meekly to capture. In a struggle the outlaws undoubtedly would grab him around the chest or at least come in contact with his body, and realize that there was padding beneath his shirt and that a gun was concealed in the padding. As long as he had it there was a fighting chance to win. Moreover, if Betty Marberry, Tonto, and the sheriff were being held somewhere in the

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tunnels that opened off the big cave, the Lone Ranger did not want to leave until he had found his friends and the lawman.

He was being marched through a narrow tunnel at the point of a gun. It was a crevasse in the subterranean rock formation of Old Baldy. The man who walked behind him held a lantern, but its light did not reach high enough to show the lofty ceiling of the cleft. The walls, however, were less than two feet.

There was not room enough for two men to walk abreast. The Lone Ranger could brush both walls with his elbows. There were many turnings and the walk seemed endless. There seemed to be a number of openings in the walls. Some were quite large and seemed to lead into branching tunnels. It would be easy to get lost in that labyrinth. When he recalled that this was only one of many tunnels that opened from the central cavern, the Lone Ranger wondered if anyone could possibly know all the twists and turns through the bowels of Old Baldy.

The footfalls echoed hollowly on the floor of hard rock which in places held small puddles of water that seeped out of the stone.

"Keep goin'," growled a voice in back. "I've told you before to keep steppin' along. This is the third time you've slowed up!"

This was true. Three times the Lone Ranger had been ordered to walk faster by the man in back. He had tried to make his slowdown imperceptible, having in mind evolving some plan of attack. For several minutes he proceeded at the quickened pace, then once again he both slowed his steps and shortened them, meanwhile patching his own dancing shadow on the floor ahead. He wanted to shorten the distance between himself and the man behind him who held both a lantern and a gun.

He would have time, he knew, for only one decisive move. If that move failed,

a bullet in the back would terminate his last adventure.

"How much farther are we going through this tunnel?" he asked.

"You'll find out."

The Lone Ranger spoke in a conversational tone in the hope that the follower would shorten the distance just a little—just enough, "I've been thinking this thing over—"

"Keep your head turned straight ahead!" the rough voice in back interrupted.

In that brief turning of his head, the Lone Ranger had noted the position of the other man. "All right," he said, "but I was just about to say that I—"

At that point he acted. Flexing his knees, he dropped low and pivoted. There was a startled exclamation from the man behind. It was choked off by the splat of knuckles on jawbone. The Lone Ranger put every ounce of energy into that blow. He brought his fist up from the ground, aiming at the place where he had calculated the man's face would be. His full weight was behind his fist, and there was the added impetus of his leg muscles as he came up from his crouching position. He felt the shock of that blow from his fingers to his shoulder. The outlaw fell back glassy-eyed, and the lantern dropped from his hand. It struck the stone floor with a crashing of glass. For a moment the light flared brightly, then went out.

In that brief instant of increased illumination the Lone Ranger saw two things. He saw the glazed look in the eyes of the man he had struck and knew that he had delivered a knockout punch. He also saw another man in the tunnel. It was a beetle-browed individual who had been following at twenty-five or thirty paces, probably to make sure Bart Benson's orders were being carried out. The man in back was bringing up a gun.

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The Lone Ranger flopped to the damp floor as the gun roared. In the confines of the tunnel it sounded like a cannon. He heard the bullet zing over his head and an instant later heard it whine as it ricocheted off the stone wall. Then there was the sound of running footsteps coming nearer. The Lone Ranger remembered an opening in the wall he had just passed. He had seen it again briefly before the tunnel had been plunged in darkness. It was less than three feet from where the unconscious man lay sprawled. If he could get into that opening, the running man might go on past the place, but first he had to get a weapon. He brushed his hand across the floor quickly, then failing to find the gun that his guard had dropped, tore open his shirt and pulled out his own gun from under the layers of blanket strips. The running steps were nearer now and they were accompanied by hoarse shouts.

The Lone Ranger found the opening and backed in, hiding his gun in readiness. Then it seemed as if the entire mountain had collapsed upon his head. There was a crushing blow that carried with it oblivion. In his last split seconds of dissolving consciousness, the Lone Ranger realized that in backing into the dark opening he had placed himself conveniently close for someone in that side tunnel to strike!

CHAPTER FOURTEEN Lawman's Torture

FOR THE SECOND time within twelve hours the Lone Ranger felt the torture of returning consciousness after a devastating blow on the head. It was like crawling out of a black pit with leaden weights pressing down on all parts of his body. His brain whirled and danced and his temples felt as if they were anvils for a thousand pounding hammers.

When he opened his eyes nothing was in focus. The pain in his head spread

until it stabbed to the bottom of his stomach. He was swept by a wave of nausea.

He closed his eyes again, conscious of only one thing. He was lying on his back, but that at first was practically the only thing about which he could be sure. And then he knew he was lying on rock. He lifted one arm experimentally and then the other, and knew that he was not tied.

There were scattered fragments of recollection. A tunnel—a flash of light—then darkness—a barking gun and running footsteps—hoarse shouts and then a blow. He remembered a man's face. It was a moonlike face, but beetle-browed, with close-cropped hair that almost met the eyebrows on the low forehead.

When the nausea subsided and his brain stopped whirling, he rolled over on his right side and raised his left hand to touch the back of his head. He felt a bump, and it was tender, but the skin seemed to be unbroken.

"Open your eyes."

The voice was low and growling. There was something familiar about it. Looking up, the Lone Ranger saw the face with beetling brows. It was the man who had fired at him in the tunnel as the lantern light expired. He was a big man—one of the biggest the Lone Ranger had ever seen. In the next moment he recognized the big man from other handbills he had seen. It was Moon Murdock, a dangerous outlaw wanted for a long list of criminal actions. He was leaning against the tunnel wall two yards away, his thick legs spread and his huge feet planted wide apart. A lighted lantern rested on the floor near by. The broken lantern lay close. "So you've come to, eh?" the giant said. "Well, now you can get to your feet. You've got some more travelin' to do."

Slowly, painfully, the Lone Ranger got to his knees, then stood leaning against the wall. The movement started new pains

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stabbing at his temples, and the giddiness returned.

"Douse some water on your face an' you'll feel better," the big man suggested, pointing to a puddle near by.

The Lone Ranger shook his head. He wanted desperately to bathe his face, but to do so might wash away some of the stain he had used for a disguise. It wasl curious that even now, when there seemed not the remotest chance that he would come out of Old Baldy alive, he clung to his determination to guard the secret I of his identity.

"I—I'm all right," he faltered. His own voice surprised him. It was thin and weak. "You ready to travel?" The Lone Ranger nodded. "There's just one thing you've got to get through your head before we start," the big man said. "Don't you try no tricks on me. You probably savvy by this time that we don't take no chances.

"You thought you'd be able to break loose if you got the Weasel out of the way. Well, you saw how far it got you. I was followin' the Weasel, an' besides that, a couple of the other boys were close at hand in the side tunnels."

"Weasel," the Lone Ranger said questioningly. "Is— is that what you call the man I struck ?"

The round-faced man grinned crookedly, showing yellow teeth that were incredibly short and widely spaced. His head bobbed in a quick nod. "Sneakiest skunk that ever breathed," he said. "I wasn't sorry to see him get one on the chin. In case you're wonderin', a couple of the boys carried him out. Now step along."

The Lone Ranger obeyed. There was nothing else to do.

The tunnel continued with more turns for a considerable distance, then ended abruptly at a solid wall of rock. There was a narrow opening in a wall on the right. It

looked as if it had been cut artificially. It was barely large enough to pass through.

Moon Murdock said, "Keep goin'. Squeeze through that openin', an' take a look at Sheriff Grant."

There was a large room beyond the opening. It was much like the cavern near the mouth. A railroad lantern, resting on the floor in the center of the room, spilled yellow light on Sheriff Grant. The sheriff lay on his back, dressed only in his underwear. His arms were extended horizontally and his hands were tied to stakes. His legs were similarly fastened at the ankles. The sheriff's eyes were open and disinterested as he looked at the Lone Ranger and Moon Murdock.

The sight of Sheriff Grant brought a flush of rage to the Lone Ranger's face.

"What have you been doing to that man?" he demanded angrily. "How long has he been staked out here?" "Not so long," replied Moon Murdock. "Only since Bart Benson took over."

"Why—" muttered the sheriff weakly—"why don't you kill me and be done with it?"

"Why don't you do what Benson wants an' be done with it?" retorted Murdock. To the Lone Ranger he said, "The boss has promised him his freedom if he'll just write his name on a piece of paper."

"What good is the promise of a man like Benson?" demanded the Lone Ranger hotly. "He wouldn't keep his word. What paper does your boss want the lawman to sign?"

"You'd better ask him. I've got nothin' to say."

"Did you bring me here only to show me Sheriff Grant?"

The big man shook his head slowly. He pointed to a twelve-pound maul and half a dozen wooden stakes about three feet in length and two inches in diameter.

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"The floor here," he explained, "ain't rock like in other parts. It's hardpan. Those stakes have to be driven in so we can tie you out spread-eagled. Grab that maul an' start drivin'."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Long Odds

THE LONE RANGER'S anger sent blood coursing through his veins and drove away the lightheadedness he had felt since regaining consciousness. The inhuman treatment of the sheriff made him want to throw caution to the winds and attack Moon Murdock with his fists. But he knew that this would accomplish nothing. It would leave Sheriff Grant and Betty Marberry as well as Tonto, completely at the mercy of the Benson gang.

Moon Murdock was standing fully ten feet away holding a gun in his right hand. Both of the Lone Ranger's own ivory-handled Colts were now tucked in Murdock's belt. He was prepared to shoot at the first sign of an aggressive move. As things stood, there was scant likelihood that the Lone Ranger could do anything to help his friends or the sheriff, or even himself, but as long as he remained alive there was a chance that he might find some way to turn the tables. He fought down his anger and go! his emotions under control.

"I'm waiting" Moon Murdock said, "an' I don't aim to wait much longer. Pick up that maul an' start drivin' those stakes into the ground. An' I want 'em a little farther apart than the sheriff's there. You seem to have longer arms an' legs than him."

The Lone Ranger's voice was steady when he spoke. "Do you," he asked, "keep all of your prisoners in this room?"

"You're lookin' for information, eh?" replied Moon Murdock, grinning.

"Benson said you had captured a girl. I think he lied."

Murdock shook his head and said, "Benson didn't lie."

"Where is the girl?"

"We got her an' the Indian as well. Scar an' Tombstone brought the two of 'em in here some time ago."

"They couldn't have."

Murdock lifted his eyebrows. "Oh, no?"

"I left them in the canyon," the Lone Ranger said, "and I came directly to the mouth of this cave. When I got here Benson said he had captured the girl. There's no way she could have gotten here without passing me on the trail."

The big man chuckled. "That just goes to show that you don't know as much as you thought you did. There's more than one entrance to these underground tunnels. The Indian an' die girl were brought in through a second hole on the eastern slope of the mountain. They're here right now an' they're prisoners. Now cut the talk an' get to work."

The Lone Ranger selected one of the pointed stakes and picked up the heavy maul. A few light taps set the stake, and then he stepped back so he could take a full swing.

He had been hoping all morning that Tonto had not been taken a prisoner. If the Indian had been at large, there would have been some chance of rescue by a posse from Scottsville under the leadership of a sheriff's deputy. Not even that possibility remained now. There could no longer be any doubt about the capture of both Betty Marberry and Tonto. They were being held and perhaps tortured somewhere in the underground labyrinth of tunnels.

The Lone Ranger realized that time was running out. He brought the maul over his head in a full swing. It landed squarely on the stake with a dull thwack[^]. The ground was hard. Despite the force of the

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blow the stake sank barely an inch. Another swing, and then another.

The situation was ironic. When four stakes had been firmly set, the man who drove them would be tied to them by strips of rawhide as the sheriff had been. It was like being made to dig his own grave. He knew that, once tied, his opportunity to make a move would be gone. Hunger, pain and exhaustion would soon sap his

strength. He would be as helpless as Sheriff Grant. Then he knew Betty Marberry would be brought into the subterranean room to look at him. Bart Benson would be there, cold and ruthless, with a paper and writing materials so die girl could sign her name to the document that would deed a gold claim to the leader of the gang. Then the sheriff would be given just one more chance to witness her signature. And Benson would have others with him. They would be prepared to inflict untold tortures if the girl refused to sign away her claim.

Moon Murdock's voice cut in on the Lone Ranger's thoughts. "That's far enough. Now drive another stake about three feet away from the first."

Benson would promise to free all the captives if the girl would sign. Of course he wouldn't keep his word. He would kill everyone concerned. He would have to kill them all because they knew he was the murderer of Betty's uncle and Ripper Smith. The Lone Ranger paused with the second stake half driven.

"Get goin'," snarled Moon Murdock. "I've got to get you tied out like the lawman."

The Lone Ranger wiped his perspiring hands on the front of his shirt, then took a fresh grip on the sledge. During the pause he had shifted his position. Murdock, watching closely, thought nothing of this change, or if he did, he said nothing about it.

The sledge whizzed over the Lone Ranger's head and down. Stake number two sank a little lower into the ground. Before the next swing the Lone Ranger shifted his feet just a little farther to the side.

He had a plan. The odds were against its success, but any move toward escape was better than no move at all. He rested the maul on his shoulder for a moment while he glanced at Moon to calculate the distance. He shifted his grip so his fingers clutched the very end of the long handle.

The head of die maul swung forward and back past the Lone Ranger's ankles, then up behind his back, but instead of passing over his head to come down on the stake, the direction of the swing changed suddenly. It was a sideways sweep. At just the right instant the Lone Ranger released the grip. The heavy implement shot through the air.

Like many men of giant size, Moon Murdock was slow in his reactions. He saw the iron maul coming toward him. He blinked stupidly. There was an instant of indecision. When he decided to dodge, it was too late. The flying maul caught him squarely in the stomach with the force and impact of a battering ram. The big man was driven backward and at the same time doubled over. The breath was driven out of his body with a sudden whoosh. The gun flew from his fingers.

The Lone Ranger charged after the maul. He didn't take the time to pick up the fallen gun or even to snatch his own guns from the outlaw's belt. He brought his fist up in a sharp blow to Moon Murdock's chin. Murdock's head snapped back. He straightened up despite the excruciating pain in his stomach. The Lone Ranger's left fist landed in the same spot as the maul. Moon Murdock howled in pain and fury. His back was against the stone wall of the room. He took another blow in the pit of the stomach, and then another.

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The Lone Ranger's fists were working like pistons. All his pent-up anger found an outlet in this attack on a man who outweighed him by fifty pounds. Moon's arms hung limply at his sides. He was helpless to defend himself. His knees began to wobble, then to buckle. He was slumping to the floor when the Lone Ranger shot home a final blow. It landed on Moon Murdock's chin. The big man collapsed and lay still.

The Lone Ranger was breathless after his exertions, but he didn't pause. He jerked his guns from Murdock's belt, scooped up the other gun from the hardpan floor, made sure they were still loaded, then dropped one into the empty holster which had been stolen from the sheriff and tucked the other in his belt. There was a knife in Murdock's boot. Using this, the Lone Ranger quickly cut the rawhide lashings from the sheriff's wrists and ankles and used them to tie Moon Murdock. "Now," he said to Sheriff Grant, "let me rub your hands and try to restore some circulation." "Wha—what a fighter you are!" There was admiration in the sheriff's voice. "Who—who are you, anyhow?"

"Never mind that now. Identities don't matter," the Lone Ranger said. He continued as he rubbed the wrists of the lawman, "As soon as you're able to stand up, you can take Murdock's gun."

The lawman shook his head. "I—I", he faltered, "I'm too weak. I won't be any help. Leave me an' save yourself. Find that Marberry girl. Get her out of here." "Do you know your way around this place?" "No. Mighty few people could find their way around this place. I know of a number of men who came in an' never came out. I couldn't find my way out in a year." "Never mind."

"Leave me," said the sheriff for the second time. "Go while you have the chance."

"Let me help you to your feet, sheriff." The Lone Ranger gripped the lawman beneath the arms and lifted him, but Sheriff Grant's legs were like rubber.

"It's no use," he said. "I—I can't stand. M-maybe in an hour or so but—but not now."

Footsteps sounded on the stone floor somewhere beyond the only opening in the vaultlike room. "They're coming here!" gasped Sheriff Grant. "Is there any other way out of this room?" "There's just that one opening—the one you came in."

A flickering yellow light could be seen beyond the narrow man-made doorway, and then Bart Benson's voice sounded hollowly. "Have you got him staked out, Moon?"

Moon Murdock couldn't reply. He was still unconscious. Benson, however, didn't wait for a reply. His voice, accompanied by the scuffling footsteps of several men, sounded nearer.

"I've got a surprise for you, Moon," Benson continued. "We were lookin' over that white horse an' we found he's wearin' silver shoes. What's more, we found a name in silver studdin' on the martingale. That man you're stakin' out is the Lone—" Bart Benson appeared in the opening and the rest of the sentence was left suspended when the outlaw leader saw the Lone Ranger standing in the center of the room with two guns held steady.

Benson cried a warning as he leaped into the room and jumped to one side. The Lone Ranger fired two shots at the legs of the men who were rushing into the room. Several guns barked in reply. There were howls of pain and rage, more gunfire, and a shattering of glass as bullets hit both lanterns—the one on the floor near Sheriff Grant, and the one that had been brought by Benson's men. The place was in total darkness broken only by the stabbing darts of flame that came from roaring six guns.

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These flames told the Lone Ranger that the outlaws were spreading out and moving along the walls to encircle him. He dropped to the ground, flat on his stomach, and started inching toward the opening. Bullets crossed and crisscrossed the room over his head. His eyes had become accustomed to the darkness and now he was aware of a faint glow that must come from a distant lantern in the corridor beyond the opening, which was now not six feet away. Suddenly he leaped to his feet and jumped through the narrow aperture.

His silhouette was seen by several men who turned their guns in that direction. They fired, but too late. The Lone Ranger was out of the room and running down the narrow corridor toward a lantern many yards away. Realizing that the light made him a perfect target, he fired one shot and the light went out.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN A Walk in Darkness

THE PITCH-DARK tunnel behind the Lone Ranger was filled with angry shouts and curses accompanied by scattered revolver shots. He had anticipated that gunfire and had thrown himself face down on the stone floor immediately after shooting out the lantern. He could hear bullets glancing off the walls on both sides and the running steps of the oncoming outlaws.

He didn't remain where he had dropped. He squirmed ahead as rapidly as possible, feeling with one hand the wall on his left side. There was an opening near by. He had seen it by the lantern light. A bullet struck chips from the rock just above his groping hand and another brushed the back of his shirt near the shoulder. Meanwhile, the running steps were coming nearer.

How close was the opening? According to his hurried calculations, he should have reached it by this time. He was

tempted to leap to his feet and run to increase the distance between himself and the Benson gang. He resisted the temptation. He knew his chances of being struck by one of the flying bullets would be increased many times if he were upright.

Then his left hand felt the jagged corner of stone. An instant later he had turned into the side tunnel, and none too soon. Within two seconds, the pursuers passed over the place he had just vacated and swept on ahead. The Lone Ranger remained motionless until he heard the shouts and footfalls far away. Then he rose to his feet and made his way through the tunnel into which he had turned. It was pitch dark. He felt his way by brushing one hand along the wall and extending the 'other hand before his body to avoid running head on into an obstructing wall of stone.

He knew little about the caverns in Old Baldy. It was the first time he had been within them, but he remembered what Sheriff Grant had said about men who had been forever lost in that bewildering labyrinth of passages. Until now he hadn't considered the peril of being lost. His only concern had been to escape from the outlaws. This he had accomplished, at least temporarily.

He wondered if Fate would let him taste the fruit of that escape. His future was entirely in the hands of Fate. He had lost all sense of direction. There was no way he could determine whether it would be wise or unwise to follow the tunnel he was in with its many turns, or to turn into one of its branches and try a new direction. He already had passed a number of branching corridors, at least that was what they seemed to be when he felt openings in the wall.

There was no way to reckon time. His watch had been broken in the brief encounter with the man he had knocked out before Moon Murdock became his custodian. Since then he had been

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unconscious, and for how long he didn't know. It might have been five minutes or five hours.

There was just one thing of which he could be sure. He was tired and hungry and he ached in every bone. The pain in his head had now become a steady throb, not as intense as at first, but still painful. His fists were bruised and chafed and the knuckles of both hands were swollen. There was little strength in his legs and his back was lame.

He decided to sit down for a moment and rest while he tried to consider his situation. It was good to sit down with his back against the tunnel wall. The cool dampness seemed to relieve the pain in his head. He found his handkerchief and rubbed it on the wall until it was moist, then held it to the lump on the back of his head.

He wondered what had happened to the sheriff. He had been compelled to leave him after the attack on Murdock. The lawman had been untied, and there was a strong likelihood that the Benson gang had left him that way. The light had been shot out and as far as the Lone Ranger could determine, the outlaws all had left the chamber and the sheriff to pursue, him. Sheriff Grant might still have Murdock's gun. This would give him a fighting chance if he could regain some measure of strength and the use of his arms and legs.

But what of Betty Marberry and Tonto? There could be no doubt about the fact that both were prisoners. Benson had planned to coerce the girl into signing away the gold mine by threats of torture. The outlaw leader could still carry out his heartless program, using Tonto as the victim or even the slender girl herself.

The situation was disheartening. The Lone Ranger then took stock of his possessions. His knife had been taken from him, but the contents of his pockets had been left undisturbed. He had his waterproof container full of matches. He had regained

possession of his guns, and he still wore the gun belt that Ripper Smith had taken from the sheriff. This gave him a fairly good supply of ammunition. He regretted having dropped and lost Moon Murdock's knife in the recent melee. He had his watch, broken and useless. There was nothing else that could possibly be of any help in the present predicament.

Working in the dark to conserve his supply of matches, he replaced the exploded cartridges in the cylinders of his guns, and then got wearily to his feet. The interlude, brief though it was, had caused his muscles to stiffen. He was more tired than ever, but he had to go on.

Which way to go? What did it matter as long as he kept moving. Keep moving—that was all he could do. Keep moving through the absolute darkness, feeling his way in die hope that he might see a glimmer of light or feel a draft of air that would give him something toward which to head.

He counted steps until the number reached a hundred, then he started counting them all over again. He kept going, fighting an increasingly strong desire to lie down on the cold, damp floor and rest for just a moment.

He knew that it would not be "just a moment." He knew that he would fall asleep instantly. But sleep and rest were out of the question. To lie down would mean to give up.

He counted off another hundred paces before his legs went numb.

"Just one more hundred," he told himself. "One more hundred, then I'll rest."

He counted up to ten before he stumbled. It was something that had never happened to him before. One leg simply refused to move, and his weight., moving forward in anticipation of the stride, carried him to the ground.

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"This isn't the end," he muttered to himself grimly. "I'm going to go on. I've got to go on."

Sitting on the floor, he dug his fingers into the muscles of his thighs and calves, massaging vigorously to get the circulation going. A moment of this, then he leaned back, pressing his head and shoulders to the wall.

It was good to close his eyes. A delicious feeling of comfort swept over him. His head no longer ached. The stinging went out of his muscles. He felt detached from all parts of his tortured body. He felt as if he were floating in space where there was neither pain nor hunger—where nothing mattered.

His shoulders slipped down on the wall until they touched the ground. He straightened out his legs, and a great sigh issued from his lips.

His last conscious thought was that it had been a long, long time since he had lain down.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN Bart Benson's Rage

BY THE TIME Bart Benson and his men realized that the Lone Ranger had eluded them by ducking into one of the side tunnels, they had gone a long distance through the corridor. They had passed at least a dozen branches, any one of which might have been utilized by the prisoner.

One of the men suggested that the gang split up and with the aid of lanterns, follow each one of the branches. This idea was instantly rejected because each branching tunnel had branches of its own.

"Never mind him," Benson growled. "Let him go. He can't find his way out of those tunnels, but even if he does, he'll wind up at one or two places. Either at the outlet on the eastern side of Baldy, or right here."

The men were gathered in the big room just inside the opening by Uncle Ben's shack. A number of them had been wounded, but none critically.

"What about Sheriff Grant?" asked Tombstone,

"Leave him where he is," replied the leader. Benson looked around the room, then said, "Where's Murdock?"

None of the men had seen him.

"He was in charge of that prisoner," Benson said. "It's his fault that the Lone Ranger got loose."

"Maybe he sold us out," someone suggested.

"Whether he sold us out or not doesn't matter. He let me down, an' for that he'll pay!"

"That Lone Ranger is mighty fast," put in the man who had been knocked down in the tunnel.

"Are you," snapped Benson angrily, "defendin' Murdock?"

"I don't mean to go against you, boss," whined Weasel. "It's just that I know how that hombre can move. He's greased lightnin'. Why, he caught me completely off guard, an' Moon Murdock is slower than I am."

"Shut your trap," snarled Bart Benson. "If Murdock shows up, keep him here until I get back."

"Where you goin'?" asked Scar.

"Scottsville," replied the leader shortly. He drew a paper from his pocket, unfolded it, and held it up for the others to see.

"That," observed Tombstone, "is the title transfer you want the Marberry girl to sign." "It is signed."

Tombstone's face remained unchanged, but the faces of the others registered surprise.

"Who signed it?" asked Tombstone. "I know the girl didn't sign it because she hasn't had a chance."

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"I signed it myself."

"Forged her name?"

Bart Benson nodded. "I found a letter she had written to her uncle in the shack. I copied the signature on it.

Tombstone shook his head doubtfully. "You can't get away with it," he said.

"Why not?" demanded the leader. "We ain't got the time to wait for the reg'lar signatures. We got to get this claim in our hands pronto."

Tombstone shrugged his shoulders.

"An' don't shrug your shoulders! I'll get away with it! It'll be easier persuadin' them hombres over in Scottsville than that stubborn tenderfoot girl. I'll be back here by sundown an' announce that I'm the new owner of this property. Then we can dispose of the girl an' the Indian an' the sheriff and start diggin' gold."

"Why didn't you tell us you had changed your plans, boss?" It was the apelike man called Scar who asked the question. "I thought you figured on forcin' the girl to sign her name to that there hunk of paper."

"I'd rather have had it that way, but now that the Lone Ranger's loose again we ain't got time. I'll have to take a chance on forged signatures. The Marberry girl has a lot of spunk. She'd die before she'd sign away the claim. An' persuadin' takes time. I might have been able to get her to sign by makin' her stand by an' watch us work over the Lone Ranger. She'd probably give away the gold mine rather than see him suffer."

"What about the Indian? Maybe we could work on him"

Bart Benson shook his head impatiently. "We'll do it this way," he said. He gave a few instructions to the others while one of the men saddled his horse, then he left the cave to travel uphill on a trail that led around the side of Old Baldy, and

downhill to the town of Scottsville a couple of hours away.

It was late afternoon when Benson returned, and his mood was as black as the innermost tunnels of Old Baldy. His horse was foamed and blood showed on the sides of its mouth from Benson's vicious handling of the reins.

He dismounted, cursing, and it was obvious to the others in the cave that -his mission to Scottsville had failed.

"There was a jug headed, addle brained fool in charge of the claim agent's office," he snarled. "He was suspicious of me as soon as he saw me. He looked over the paper, an' said he couldn't register it as a claim title transfer."

"Did he suspicion it was forged?" asked Tombstone.

"I don't know whether he did or not. He just said it wasn't legal because there wasn't no witnesses. He wanted to know where the sheriff was at."

"He want to know how Ben Marberry died?"

"Sure he did," said Benson. "I had an airtight story to take care of everything. I told him Ripper Smith had killed old Marberry. He already knew that the girl's pa was dead. Ben didn't file until after his brother died. Then I told him Sheriff Grant had got Ripper for the murder—Ripper put up a fight an' the sheriff killed him. The claim agent swallowed all this, but he wanted to see the sheriff's signature before he accepted the transfer."

Tombstone nodded approvingly. "That's a good enough story, Benson. It accounts for everything except the disappearance of the girl an' Sheriff Grant."

"They haven't disappeared yet," Benson said, "but I told a story that will cover things when they do. I told that fool agent that the Marberry girl wanted to go back East an' that was why she sold me the

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gold claim. I told him the sheriff was goin' to go part way with her."

"Gosh, Bart," said the scar-faced man admiringly, "you sure covered everythin', No one will be the least bit suspicious when Sheriff Grant doesn't come back to Scottsville."

"I covered everything," spat Benson, "but I didn't get the title transfer registered." He crumpled up the paper with the forged signature and threw it on the floor. Tombstone stepped forward and picked it up.

"Never mind that," Benson bellowed. "I've got another paper made out. I'll get the girl to sign it—in blood if it's necessary."

"Yeah, but you told the agent that the girl's gone back East," said Scar.

Meanwhile Tombstone was smoothing out the crumpled paper. He held it close to an oil lamp and studied the signature.

"You might," he said slowly, "have gotten away with this transfer except for one thing."

"What's that?" demanded Bart Benson.

"The name Marberry' is spelled with two r's! You put in only one."

Bart Benson's face grew red, then white with anger. He looked from one to another of the men as if daring anyone to make a comment.

"It's a common enough mistake," Tombstone said softly. "You couldn't be blamed for it. What difference does an extra letter more or less make? We'll get the girl to sign her name just like you said, an' we'll get witnesses. You can tell the agent that the girl sprained her ankle an' had to come back. An' do you s'pose that Indian could have shot the sheriff?" he asked with a grin on his pale face.

Footsteps sounded in one of the tunnels. Bart Benson turned quickly in the direction from which they came.

"Someone's comin'."

"It's Flagg," Tombstone told the leader as lantern light showed in an opening on the left.

"Where's he been?"

"Lookin' for Moon Murdock. We waited around a couple of hours, an' when Moon didn't show up, we figured it would be a good idea to go lookin' for him."

The man named Flagg appeared at the mouth of one of the tunnels, holding a lantern. Seeing that Bart Benson had returned, he grinned and said, "You won't have to bother to punish Moon Murdock. He's been punished."

"How's that?" Benson asked.

Flagg said, "I went back to the room where we had left Sheriff Grant staked out. Somebody untied Sheriff Grant."

"Untied him! That must have been the Lone Ranger!" exclaimed Bart Benson.

"Don't worry, boss, it won't do him any good. He's dead an' so's Murdock dead. There was a lot of gunplay in that room. Two bullets found Moon Murdock, an' one had Grant's name on it."

Benson said, "Oh, I see. Well, that's that. Now we'll get busy on the girl. I—Wait a minute!" he said after an abrupt pause. "I've got a plan to make that girl sign anything I want her to! We'll use the sheriff."

"But, boss," Jim Flagg said, "I just told you he's dead." "That won't matter," Benson replied. "We can still use him. Take a couple of the boys to carry him an' bring him out here."

The day was gone and darkness had fallen by the time Flagg and the others had returned to the spacious cavern with the body of Sheriff Grant wrapped in a blanket.

"Don't put it down," Bart Benson said. "Just follow me, an' bring that bundle with you."

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN Beyond the Wall

THE LONE RANGER'S sleep was caused by sheer exhaustion. The demands made on his body during the past twenty-four hours would have drained the vitality of any man. His endurance had been taxed to the utmost and far beyond.

Before reaching Wild Horse Canyon in response to Tonto's summons, he had spent many hours in the saddle. A man of average strength would have been ready at that point to find a shelter from the storm and sleep. But the Lone Ranger had fought his way through the storm until he had found the bridge destroyed. After that, events had piled one on the other with bewildering rapidity. After the stampede of wild horses, followed by the rescue of Betty Marberry, the short respite in the wigwam could hardly be called a period of rest. Then had come the search for Betty's horse and the encounter with Ripper Smith and Bart Benson. Soon after regaining consciousness, the Lone Ranger had set out and spent the remainder of the night in searching for the girl. It had been daybreak when he found her and Tonto joined them. Breakfast had been a hurried meal. It had been a hard uphill ride to the cave, and after that he had been through several strenuous situations. The attack on Weasel—the fight with Moon—and the desperate dash through the dark passages for freedom. Sheer will power had kept him going until finally his tortured muscles and nerves had rebelled.

He slept for several hours. When he wakened he was stiff and lame. His throat felt raw and his tongue was dry. He wakened slowly in total darkness. It was fully three minutes before he could remember what had happened.

The ground on which he lay was damp. His clothes felt clammy. He sat up

and moved his arms and legs until he had worked out some of the stiffness.

His head no longer ached. He felt refreshed but hungry. He knew from the cramped condition of his muscles that he had slept for a considerable length of time. He couldn't even guess how long. He judged from his hunger that it must be evening now, but for all he knew, it might even be morning of the following day.

He moved his hand to push himself to his feet, and encountered a water-filled depression in the rocky ground. The water was an inch or so in depth. Turning, he bent low and touched his tongue to the cool liquid.

It tasted pure and sweet. He sucked up a mouthful and swallowed it. It was refreshing, so he drank some more. As he stood up, he thought he heard the sound of gushing water. He couldn't remember having heard it previously, but that could easily be accounted for. Before his sleep, all of his senses of perception had been dulled,

He pressed his ear close to the wall near which he stood, and listened intently. There was no doubt about it. Rippling, gushing water was flowing somewhere nearby.

He remembered a small stream flowing out of one of the many tunnels and crossing the big room where the outlaws lived and kept their horses. That might be the very stream he now heard. If he could find that stream and follow it—would it lead him to the outlaws? It would certainly lead somewhere. At least it would give him a definite direction, which would be much more satisfactory than moving blindly through one dark tunnel after another.

He couldn't decide on the direction of the sound, so he set out, one hand on the wall and one ahead in the same direction he had been moving before exhaustion had overtaken him. He took ten steps, then paused again to press his ear against the wall

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and listen for the sound of running water. Ten more steps. He listened again. Then ten more and so on. After several stops the sound was becoming louder. Then he encountered a branching tunnel, turned to his left, and followed it, listening at each tenth pace as before. When he was sure the sound was growing fainter, he worked his way back and continued along his original course.

During the next half hour as the Lone Ranger moved slowly forward the sound grew definitely louder. He could hear it easily now without pressing his ear close to the wall. The nature of the floor had changed too. It was no longer hard rock. It was sandy gravel.

Now the sound of rushing water was unmistakable. It seemed to come from somewhere very close at hand. Yet when he moved on the sound faded. He came back, then struck one of his precious matches.

The tunnel at this point was wider, and a sizable pool of water lay close to the left-hand wall. The Lone Ranger plunged his hand into the pool and found that it was eight or nine inches deep. Lying on his belly, he drank deeply from the pool.

During the next few minutes he moved experimentally in several directions from the pool. When he learned that the bubbling, rippling sound was louder near the pool than at any other point, he began to realize the ironic truth.

He was probably as close to the flowing stream as he was going to get. The stream was just beyond the tunnel's wall. Seepage from the stream had formed the pool. To reach that stream and carry out his plan to follow it, he would have to penetrate the wall of solid rock. There was probably a tunnel that paralleled the one in which he stood. But how to reach it was the problem.

"How thick is that wall?" he muttered. He wondered whether it was a matter of inches or of feet.

At that moment he heard the high-pitched voice of a girl. It seemed to come from the wall. When he pressed his ear close he heard someone cry, "You beast!"

The voice was shrill and trembling with emotion but it was recognizable,

"Betty Marberry!" the Lone Ranger exclaimed softly.

There was the mumble, too, of men's voices, but they 'ere too low to be intelligible. He heard a chuckle, then the girl cried again,

'You gave me your word you'd let us go if I signed lat paper. You promised me you'd show us the way out of here."

"Tie her hands." That was Benson speaking. "Tie her hands again, an' then make sure the Indian can't get loose. I want to see how long he can stand that water before he goes out of his head."

CHAPTER NINETEEN Ordeal by Water

THE LONE RANGER couldn't know that his wanderings had brought him to within fifty yards of the tunnel's mouth. In between, however, were several walls of solid stone.

Scar and Tombstone had forced Tonto and Betty Marberry to walk through a long corridor that connected the small secret opening on the eastern slope of Old Baldy with the big cavern just inside the southern entrance.

Bart Benson had been delighted to see the girl back in his hands, a prisoner. He had produced a paper and asked her point blank whether or not she would sign it. She had, of course, refused.

"I know all about your game," she had declared defiantly. "I know that the man who pretended to be the sheriff was really Ripper Smith! You can't frighten me into giving you or anyone else this gold mine which I inherited from Uncle Ben!"

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At that point Tombstone had stepped forward, saying, "Want me to see if I can change her mind, boss?"

Benson had said, "No, not just yet. Take her an' the Indian into the room where the water drips from the ceiling. Tie them both up an' leave them there until later."

The stream of water that flowed across the floor near one side of die cavern came out of one of the many openings that studded the big circular rock wall. One of the outlaws, carrying a lantern, led the way into this tunnel for approximately fifty paces. At that point the corridor expanded in both height and breadth to make a room perhaps as large as Uncle Ben's cabin. The stream curved through this room close to one wall, the wall farthest from the gang's headquarters. The floor was wet with water that dripped monotonously from the ceiling. It was in this room that Tonto and Betty Marberry were tied both hand and foot and left in total darkness for what seemed an eternity.

At first the prisoners tried to talk, but there was little food for conversation. At Tonto's suggestion, Betty lay down and tried to sleep, but her limbs were cramped the ropes that bound her cut into her flesh pain-. She soon gave up sleep as hopeless.

"How long do you think they'll keep us here?" she asked. "Do you think our masked friend will be able to do any thing?"

Tonto couldn't answer either question. After what seemed to them a long time had passed, they heard a commotion somewhere beyond the rocky walls. That was when the Lone Ranger, posing as Ripper Smith, had been exposed as an impostor, and captured. There was lots of talk, and scuffling, but it was indistinct. Neither Tonto nor Betty knew what it was all about until a long time later when one of the gang appeared with a lantern.

Seizing the opportunity, Betty looked at a small gold watch she wore

pinned to her shirt. She was somewhat shocked to learn that it was only noon. Time had dragged so heavily she would have been willing to wager that it was nearly sunset.

"I came here to tell you two that we got your friend," said the outlaw.

"Who you mean?" asked Tonto. "What friend?" demanded the girl. The outlaw grinned. "It didn't take Bart Benson long to find out he wasn't Ripper Smith. Benson wanted me to let you know in case you two were countin' on him to get you out of here. If that was the case, you can stop hopin'."

"The boss figured you might like to change your mind about signin' over your property claim if you knew that we had another prisoner." This last was directed at Betty.

"You go back and tell your boss that what I said still goes. Nothing can make me change my mind."

The outlaw shrugged his shoulders. "That," he said, "is up to you. I'll take back the word."

He turned to go, but paused at the place where the room narrowed down to a tunnel, and looked back. "If I was you," he said, "I'd sign. Benson hasn't any grudge against you or your friends. He don't want to hurt any of you. He wants the gold claim, an' he'll get it one way or another. You give it to him, an' he'll cut you an' your friends free—give you a good meal, an' cash enough for travel, then let you go on your way."

"That," retorted Betty, "is a lie. He wouldn't dare let us out of here! He knows we'd go directly to the law and expose him as the murderer of Uncle Ben and Ripper Smith."

"Bart Benson ain't afraid of anything you might tell the law," the outlaw replied. "In these parts he's pretty much the law. Besides, you couldn't prove a single thing. Mark my words, miss, you'd be smart to sign the paper Benson has got all ready, an'

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leave here with your friends. Want me to untie your hands so you can sign?"

He sounded convincing. For a moment Betty was half-persuaded that Bart Benson really would let her go free with Tonto and the Lone Ranger. She glanced at Tonto. The Indian shook his head slowly.

"How about it?" asked the outlaw.

"You have my answer. Take it to Bart Benson."

"You won't sign?"

"No." The outlaw's footsteps died away and the light went with him. Then there was another interminable period of waiting in the darkness. The only sound was the steady drip-drip-drip of water from the ceiling to a pool on the floor. At first the dripping sound was hardly noticeable. But its persistence made it increasingly annoying until each drop seemed to fall with nerve-jangling force.

There were times when Betty thought she must go mad. She had lost all sense of feeling in her tightly bound hands and feet, and she ached in every muscle from the cramped position in which she had to sit. She tried counting the seconds. Sixty of them to a minute, but she gave up after she had counted oft less than ten long minutes.

It was during that everlasting afternoon that Bart Benson went to Scottsville with the girl's name forged to a transfer of title and returned in a black mood.

Many times during those hours both Betty and Tonto wondered about the fate of the Lone Ranger. Neither knew that he was sleeping the sleep of sheer exhaustion in a dark passage just beyond the rock wall on the other side of the stream.

The water dripped and dripped and dripped. Betty's nerves were strained almost to the breaking point. She wanted to cry out; to scream. She felt that anything— pain of torture, even death itself—would be

desirable if only it brought an end to these hours of waiting in the darkness.

She had long since stopped trying to tell herself that the situation could be worse. She might have been gagged as well as tied. She might have suffered an injury which would have added physical pain to the mental suffering. But consolations such as these brought no comfort. Just when it seemed that she could stand no more of the uncertainty and waiting, she heard footsteps in the corridor, then saw the gleam of an approaching lantern.

Bart Benson came into the room accompanied by several men with lanterns. Betty Marberry and Tonto blinked in the light. Then two other men came in carrying between them a blanket-wrapped figure.

"Put it down right there," Benson said, pointing.

Jim Flagg and another man placed the bundle on the damp floor. Benson stopped. He pulled aside the blanket to expose the white, still face of Sheriff Grant.

"Recognize him?" he asked coolly.

Betty gasped, "It's—it's—"

"That's right," chuckled Benson, "It's your friend, the Lone Ranger. He done a fair job of imitatin' Ripper Smith, who was niasqueradin' as Sheriff Grant."

"You—you murdered him!"

"Well, I wouldn't say that," Bart Benson said. "We just captured him. He died—by accident." "Why did you bring him here? Why are you showing me this?"

"I wanted you to see what happens to men who get in my way." Benson produced a document from one of his pockets. "Right here," he said, "I've got the property transfer. All it needs is your signature. You sign it an' you'll go free."

"I'll sign nothing!"

"That's what I thought you'd say. That bein' the case, well have to go to work an' change your mind." Benson turned to his

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companions and said, "You men know what you're to do."

With a few grunts of assent, the men moved forward and seized Tonto by the shoulders. They pulled him back so he lay flat on the ground, then cut the ropes that held his wrists and pulled his arms out horizontally from his shoulders. The outlaws seemed to know exactly what to do and how to do it. They dragged the Indian across the floor until his head lay in a pool of water—the pool that had been formed by constant dripping from the ceiling. The next drop splashed squarely in the center of the Indian's forehead.

"Notice where that drop landed?" Bart Benson asked the girl. "It didn't hurt. The second drop won't hurt, or the third. But after a time, each drop will feel like molten iron. Drops of water like that will wear away the hardest stone. It don't take long for them to turn a sane man into a ravin' maniac."

Four men held Tonto motionless. One sat on his bound feet, one on each arm, and the fourth held the Indian's head clamped as in a vise.

"No, no!" cried Betty. "Let him go!"

Bart Benson grinned, "You'll sign that paper?"

It was Tonto who replied stolidly, "You not sign."

"It's an easy way," Benson went on persuasively, "to get your freedom as well as the Indian's."

"N-n-no," said Betty weakly.

"You'll change your mind," the outlaw leader said confidently, "after you've watched the Indian for a spell. Drive stakes in, boys, an' tie him that way."

Two men had heavy mallets and a supply of pointed stakes. They lashed Tonto's hands, and two stakes were driven close together with Tonto's head between them so he could turn neither to one side nor the other to avoid the dropping water. While this was being done, Tonto talked to Betty.

"You not sign. You never sign. Me Indian. Me not hurt by anything they do. Me not mind water."

"Oh, Tonto," sobbed the girl.

"You not believe anything him say. Him never let us go. If you sign, him only kill us quicker."

"This is your last chance," Bart Benson said when the last of the stakes had been sunk into the ground and the last of the rawhide lashings tightly knotted.

"I'm leavin' you an' the Indian right here. It'll be a long time before any of us return to see how you're gettin' along. You want to sign your name, now, or stay here in the dark an' listen to the drips of water?"

Betty thought of the hours of waiting she had endured. The thought of more such dragging hours in darkness with the added torture of knowing that drop by drop the stalwart Indian who had proved himself a friend was slowly being made a madman was more than she could tolerate. She thought of the still body of the Lone Ranger who had given his life in her service.

"Tell me just one thing."

"What's that?" Benson asked.

"If I sign your paper, will you let me go, and will you let Tonto go?"

"Sure thing," agreed Benson.

"Will you swear to that?"

"Course I will. I've got no reason to keep you folks here, after I get the gold mine. You just sign the paper an' I'll free the both of you."

"Very well, I'll sign your paper."

"Not sign," Tonto put in. "Him never keep word. You not sign."

"I must, Tonto."

Benson spread out his paper and offered the girl a pen and a bottle of ink. "I thought you'd finally come around to my way of thinkin'," he said genially. "You, Tombstone, untie her hands so's she can write her name."

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Betty said, "I doubt if I'll be able to hold a pen. My fingers are numb."

"There's no hurry. Just rub your hands together and in a few minutes they'll be all right."

It took some time to get the circulation restored to her numbed hands and fingers, but presently Betty was able to grip the pen. She closed her ears to Tonto's pleas, and signed her name.

"There you are," she said.

Bart Benson studied the signature carefully. "Now," he said, "I'll put down the name of Sheriff Grant as a witness." He looked at the girl, grinning. "He's dead, you know, because he wouldn't play along with us, but I've got papers with his name written on. It'll be easy to copy his signature."

"Untie Tonto," Betty said. Then she knew by Benson's crooked grin that she had made a great mistake. The outlaw shook his head slowly.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but I can't do that."

"But you promised—you gave me your word—"

Benson nodded to one of his men, who stepped forward with a length of cord. "Tie her wrists again," he ordered.

"Benson!" cried the girl. "You promised you'd let us go!"

"I've made a lot of promises in my day. I've found that it's a good way to get what I want."

"You're not going to let us go!" "That would be downright foolish of me. Why should I let you go to make trouble?"

Betty's voice was shrill and high-pitched with futile anger. "You beast!" she cried.

Bart Benson chuckled at her fury.

"You gave me your word you'd let us go if I signed that paper! You promised me you'd show us the way out of here!"

"Tie her hands again, an' then make sure the Indian can't get loose. I want to see

how long he can stand that water before he goes out of his head."

Those were the words that the Lone Ranger, his ear glued to the opposite side of the wall, had heard.

CHAPTER TWENTY

A Ray of Hope

THE LONE RANGER couldn't hear all of the conversation beyond the stone wall, but he had heard enough to know that Betty Marberry had signed a document for Bart Benson. He knew also that the outlaw leader had broken his word and ordered the girl retied instead of giving her her freedom.

The Lone Ranger held his ear pressed close to the wall for a long time before he finally concluded that Benson and the other members of the gang had left the cavern. He assumed that Betty and Tonto were still just beyond the wall.

"If I could only get to them," he told himself. "I wonder if there isn't an opening in this wall."

He removed his hat and placed it on the sandy ground in the center of the corridor to mark the spot at which he had heard the voices, then felt his way along the wall for fifty feet or more, but there was no break in the rocky surface. He retraced his steps; counting the paces carefully until he had returned to the starting point. Then he explored in the opposite direction with no measure of success.

Perhaps he could communicate with Tonto. He pressed his ear to the wall again and listened. No sound came through from the other side. Keeping his ear in place, he drew his gun from the holster and using the handle as a mallet, tapped three times on the stone. He listened some more, but there was no response. He tapped again and listened. Silence. Either Tonto had been moved or left tied so he could not respond to the signals.

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The Lone Ranger sat down on the sand beside the pool. Should he remain there as close as he could get to his friends, or should he leave that spot and continue his explorations in the hope of finding a route that would take him either to Tonto or to the outside world?

Mechanically his fingers toyed with the sand.

"There's running water," he murmured, "just beyond this wall. It may be the stream I saw flowing through the cavern at the entrance. Perhaps that is the cave beyond this wall. That stream seems to have seeped through to this side. That's what formed the pool in here. It's water from that stream that is seeping through to fill—"

His thinking stopped abruptly. For the first time he was aware of the fact that his hand had scooped out a small pit five or six inches deep, and that the pit was filling with water.

"How deep is this sand?" he muttered. "I can't go through that wall, but I might be able to go under it!"

Inspired by this hope, he went to work digging in earnest. He was on his knees, digging with both hands and scooping out handful after handful of wet sand. Seepage had become a problem, when he had cleaned out a hole a couple of feet in width and depth. He was in water over his elbows, and at his side he had accumulated a sizable pile of mucky sand. Up to this point he had dug straight down, but now he changed the direction of his operations, working at the sand on the side of the hole nearest the wall of rock.

Hope surged higher when he learned that the rock formation extended less than six inches below floor level! He was scooping sand from directly beneath the wall.

His fingers were sore and the fingernails were broken but he dug on feverishly, spurred by the possibility of

reaching the side of Tonto and Betty. He didn't know what he would do when he had joined his friends. There would still be the Benson gang to reckon with, but whatever might lie ahead in the way of peril, it would be easier for all three of them if they could face it together.

Water kept seeping into the hole to maintain its level. At one point the Lone Ranger used his hat as a dipper and tried to bail out the water to facilitate the digging, but he soon decided that this was wasted effort. Water kept coming in as fast as he could dip it out.

When he paused to rest, he listened once more with his ear close to the wall. There was no sound except the gurgling of a stream of water. He returned to the task, wondering how thick that wall might be — how far must he dig to reach the other side?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE Reunion in Darkness

UTTER DARKNESS enveloped Betty Marberry and Tonto. Bart Benson and his men had left and taken all the lanterns with them as well as the blanket-wrapped body of Sheriff Grant and the paper which now conveyed a gold mine to the outlaw leader.

Fired by an all-consuming rage, the slender girl hauled and tugged at the cords around her wrists until the soft flesh was torn and bleeding. She was numb to pain. She could think of only one thing—escape. She would have bartered her soul for freedom and a gun with a chance to fire one shot at the smirking, sneering, cold-blooded outlaw who had lied so convincingly.

Her voice was choked, half sobbing with anger and frustration. "I should have known better," she gritted. "I should have known they would never let us go. Oh, Tonto, what a fool I was to sign that paper. I haven't improved our situation at all. Benson plans to keep us here until we die." There

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was a pause while she strained once more against the ropes in the vain hope of stretching it or loosening it enough to free her hands.

"Why don't they shoot us and get it-over with? I suppose that would be too merciful a thing for Benson to consider."

There was no sound from Tonto.

"Tonto," Betty said, "is that water still dripping on your forehead?"

"No matter," Tonto replied gutturally.

"How—how long can you stand it? Oh, if there were only something I could do to make it easier for you. I'm to blame for everything. If it weren't for me, you wouldn't be here and neither would your friend."

"No matter," said the Indian a second time.

"Wait a minute!" Betty said suddenly. "I have an idea. You can't move to dodge that dripping water, but I can move. I'm not tied to stakes as you are."

The girl swung her feet, tied together at the ankles, toward Tonto, then inched forward until her toes touched the Indian.

"Just a minute," she said. "I've got to get quite close."

Leaning forward, she extended her hands and said, "Must find your head."

Tonto felt the girl touch his extended arm, then her fingers traveled to his shoulders, and to one of the stakes beside his head. He heard her moving.

"I'm trying to get to my knees," she said, grunting slightly with the effort. "It isn't easy with my hands and feet tied."

"What you try to do?" asked Tonto.

"I want to get to my knees just above your head, then I can lean forward. I—I can make it."

After a few more gasps, Betty said, "Now tell me, do you still feel the water dropping to your forehead?"

"What you do?" asked Tonto.

"I'm bending over. I'm trying to take the place of an umbrella. The water is dropping on my back instead of on your forehead."

"You plenty brave,"

"Nonsense. This doesn't take any courage. I can't even feel the drops of water, and even if I did, they wouldn't bother me. I can move so they don't all drop on a single spot."

"You never give up hope. That why you brave."

"But I have given up hope, Tonto. There's no possible way for us to get out of here. Even if we were free, we couldn't get past those men in the big cave near the entrance and now that the Lone Ranger's dead there's no one."

"You on knees?" asked Tonto.

"Yes."

"You bend forward?"

"That's right, Tonto."

"That plenty uncomfortable. You not stay long in that position." "I'll stay here as long as I can."

"That no good."

"Doesn't it help if I keep the water from dripping on your forehead?"

"That only postpone end."

"Tonto," Betty said suddenly, "I've tried and tried to loosen my hands. I can't do it, but maybe I can loosen yours. Can you stand the drops of water while I try?"

When the Indian grunted affirmation, Betty extended both her hands and felt until she found the cord that held one of Tonto's wrists close to a firmly set stake. The knots were small and drawn as tight as possible. A strong man with strong fingers would not have been able to loosen those knots. It was far beyond the power of the slim girl, whose fingers were numb and fumbling in darkness, to accomplish anything. She gave up in despair.

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"It's no use," she sighed. "I can't do anything but shield you from the dripping water. I—"

"Wait!" interrupted Tonto.

"What is it?"

"Quiet," said the Indian. "Listen."

The silence that followed was broken only by the rippling of the stream near the wall.

Presently Betty whispered, "What are you listening for?"

"Not know," replied Tonto in a low voice. "Keep-um quiet. Listen more."

Then Betty heard it. The sound was ever so faint, but it was something she hadn't heard before. It was a splashing sort of sound as if someone were bathing in the stream.

"I hear it," she said. "It's coming from the stream!"

"That what me think," replied the Indian.

"Oh, I wish we had a light," sighed Betty.

During the next few moments neither spoke. Both listened intently to the gurgling and splashing which grew louder and sounded more than ever as if someone were moving in the stream of water. Then it stopped and there was nothing but the steady ripple.

Betty held her breath. For some strange reason she felt that someone was in the room—someone who had not been there a few minutes earlier. It may have been intuition or a sixth sense, but whatever it was the girl knew that she and Tonto were no longer alone. She sensed a movement very close at hand. And then she heard water dripping on the floor. It was not a steady drip-drip-drip. It was more like the sound one might hear if someone with sodden clothing had emerged from water. Then there was a squishing sound. Someone was approaching with water-filled boots.

Tonto broke the silence. "Who there?" he asked.

"Tonto!" The single two-syllable utterance made Betty gasp. The voice in the darkness was low and it was close. It had a familiar quality.

"Tonto," it said again. "Are you here?" "Ugh," replied the Indian softly. "Me here. Me tied to stakes. Girl here, too."

"Anyone else?" the deep voice questioned softly.

The Indian said, "Outlaws in cave near by. No outlaw in here."

"Good."

There were unmistakable qualities in the low voice. Betty suddenly knew that Tonto's friend, whom she had seen lying dead wrapped in a blanket, in some miraculous way was alive again.

"How you get here?" Tonto asked.

"I was on the other side of the wall. I heard you and Betty and the outlaws talking. I tunneled beneath the wall. Tell me, Tonto, how are you tied ?"

"Hands tied to stakes on each side," the Indian explained. "Other stake on each side of head. Me not move hand—not move head. Feet tied too."

"I'll risk a light." The Lone Ranger took a match from his waterproof case and scratched it on a rock. A tiny light flared long enough for Betty to see the new arrival and for the Lone Ranger to see how Tonto had been tied. But the girl was too dazed by the events of the last few moments to be able to speak a word. The Lone Ranger was alive, after all. He had come to rescue them!

"You got-um knife?" asked Tonto.

"No, but I have matches. I can burn those ropes off."

Tonto said, "Keep-um voice low. Outlaws not far away."

Betty Marberry finally found her voice. "Oh, I thought you were dead. They brought a man here in a blanket and said it was you. How did you ever find us?"

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The Lone Ranger was holding the match flame to the cords that held Tonto's right wrist to a stake. Meanwhile he was puzzling over the girl's words.

"It was pure luck," he said. Then he added, "The body you saw must have been some poor fellow who wasn't as lucky as I was."

"This face seemed the same as yours—after you had put on your makeup this morning."

But the Lone Ranger was too busy at that moment to clear up the mystery.

"I can set you free," he said, striking another of his precious matches, "but I have no idea how to get us out of here. I've been wandering through these tunnels for hours."

"We know," whispered Betty. "We have only to follow the stream of water. It flows right through a big room near the mouth of the cave. That's where all the outlaws and their horses are."

"I know that room all right." The rope burned through and Tonto's right wrist was free. "Now for the other one," the Lone Ranger said, striking another match, "I'll get you free, Tonto, then you can take a gun and stand watch while I free Betty." Tonto grunted.

"Do you still have your guns?" Betty asked in surprise.

"They were taken from me, but I got them back."

Tonto said, "Sheriff Grant dead."

"I know, Tonto, I could hear some of the conversation when Eenson was here with you."

Betty exclaimed: "Then that's whose body it was! They brought it here to make me think it was you. And I did! It was the last straw when I supposed you were dead. I knew the only hope was to give in. I signed his paper."

"I know."

"I've signed away my gold mine. I wouldn't have minded that if it had meant freedom for all of us, but Benson lied. He—"

"I know about it, Betty."

"What are we going to do when we're free? We can't possibly get past those outlaws."

"We've got to get past them," the Lone Ranger said.

"But there must be twenty of them altogether, and there are only three of us."

"And two guns," the Lone Ranger added.

"Oh, it's hopeless to try to get out on this side of the mountain. And we can't get to the other side without going through the big cavern. At best we can only hope to die fighting, but that will be better than sitting here in the darkness for hours and perhaps days before we finally starve to death."

Tonto's left hand now was free. The Indian rubbed his wrists vigorously to restore the circulation, while the Lone Ranger worked to free his feet.

"Now, Tonto," the Lone Ranger said, extending one of his guns, "take this while I get Betty's hands and feet free of these ropes. That gun's been wet, but it was oiled and I think it will work."

It was a slow process to burn through the strong cords without burning the girl's wrists. The Lone Ranger used more of his matches freeing her hands and then her feet. During this time he briefly summarized his experiences from the time he had left Tonto and the girl in Wild Horse Canyon until the discovery that he could tunnel through the sand and then crawl under water beneath the wall.

"You know the rest," he finished. Then he asked, "Has some of the numbness left your hands?"

"They'll be all right," the girl replied. "I've been rubbing them."

"How about you, Tonto?"

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"Me all right," Tonto said. "Me ready for plenty big fight. We go now?"

"No, not just yet." The Lone Ranger was fumbling in darkness as he spoke.

"What you do?" asked Tonto. "I came here disguised because I wanted these crooks to think that I was Ripper Smith. Originally I had false whiskers and a wig. They're gone."

"Me know that," replied Tonto, who had seen his friend in the light of the matches. "You got-um plenty stain left on face. Me see that, too."

"I didn't know whether or not any of the stain was left. In any event it doesn't matter. I'm putting on my mask." The Lone Ranger had drawn out his mask, which he had carried in one of his pockets throughout the entire adventure. He fixed it in place across the upper part of his face, then said, "Just one thing more. Stick out your hand, Tonto. I'll give you some extra cartridges."

"Not need-um extra cartridges," replied the Indian. "We not have time to reload guns."

"Take them anyway." The Lone Ranger had extracted half a dozen cartridges from the gun belt. He transferred these to Tonto's hands.

"Now," he said, "we're nearly ready to make our move."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO Last-Minute Plans

"IM SURE our guns are all right," said the Lone Ranger. "But let's stop long enough to wipe them dry. After all they've been under water."

"You under water, too," replied Tonto. "You dripping wet. Me hear water drop from clothes when you come here."

"That's a thought, Tonto."

"Not only that," put in Betty Marberry. "I heard your boots. They made a squishing sound when you walked."

The Lone Ranger removed his shirt in the total darkness and wrung it out. Before putting it back on, he squeezed as much water as possible from the rest of his clothes.

"Take off your boots," said the girl in a matter-of-fact voice. "I'll try to dry them."

"There's not much you can do about them."

"Take them off and let me try." The Lone Ranger sat down on the floor. As he pulled off his water-soaked boots he heard the sound of ripping cloth.

"What's that?" he asked quickly in a low voice,

"Hand me those boots and don't ask too many questions."

"But I heard something rip—" the Lone Ranger said as he held out his boots and felt them taken from his hand.

"That's right. We needed dry cloth to wipe your boots. You'll probably also want some dry cloth to wipe your guns."

"That's true—"

"My—my outer clothing is quite damp but I'm wearing—er—at least I was wearing—uh—" Betty was faltering in embarrassment.

Despite the peril of the situation, the Lone Ranger chuckled. "I understand," he said, then added, "Good thinking on your part. If you'll hand me a piece of cloth, I'll get to work on my gun."

"Just a minute."

The ripping sound was twice repeated.

"Here," continued Betty, "is a piece of cloth for you and one for Tonto. Where are you?"

After a bit of groping in the darkness the hands of the girl and the masked man met. His fingers closed around a soft-textured material. "There," whispered Betty, "are two pieces of my chemise. Give one of them to Tonto."

"Here you are, Tonto."

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"Me got-um," muttered the Indian.

Working in the total darkness solely by sense of touch, the two men dismantled the two guns and wiped each part with meticulous care. They even wiped the cartridges before replacing them in the chambers of the cylinders. Meanwhile, Betty wiped the masked man's boots both inside and out. "The boots are ready," she announced when she had finished.

"And so is this gun," replied the Lone Ranger.

"This too," added Tonto.

"I'm holding the boots out," Betty said. "Where are you?"

The masked man groped some more, found his boots, and pulled them on.

"I suppose," said Betty wistfully, "this is all a waste of time."

"What's a waste of time?"

"All these precautions. There's not much use in drying out your guns and boots and wringing the water from your clothes. It can't possibly help us."

"Why not?"

"Even if we take those outlaws by surprise, we can't possibly win. You and Tonto might be able to shoot two or three of them, but the others will surely kill us all before we can escape."

"Is that how you feel, Betty?"

"We might as well face the facts. I don't mind dying. I'm not afraid to die. A quick death from a bullet will be ever so much better than—than staying here for hours and days to suffer—before we die. There's just one thing I'm hoping for. I hope you can get that beast Bart Benson."

Silence followed the girl's brave speech.

"Did you hear me?" she asked after a pause.

"Yes," the deep voice replied. "Yes, Betty, I heard you."

"You didn't say anything."

"Let me listen for a moment." Silence again. Then the Lone Ranger said, "I didn't hear the voices of any of the men, did you, Tonto?"

"Not hear-um."

"Are they too far away?"

"That right. Voices not carry back this far from room where outlaws live."

"Then I guess there's little likelihood that they've heard us talking."

Tonto agreed.

"Betty," the masked man gravely spoke again. "I'll admit that the odds are heavy against us."

"Of course they are."

"But I won't admit that we are going to fail."

"How can you have hope?" asked the girl. "You know the odds even better than I do."

"It is never good to go into a fight expecting to lose. If we do that, we're half licked before we start. When we attack that gang, we're going to do it with every expectation of winning."

"But that is impossible."

"Not at all. We have had a lot of misfortune, but we've also had some good luck along with it. Just think back over the things that have happened since last night. Think of the times you might have been killed."

"I—I would have drowned if you hadn't pulled me out of Wolf Creek."

"Before that, you might have been run down by the wild horse stampede, or you might have been killed by Ripper Smith when you made your escape."

"That's true."

"You and I," continued the Lone Ranger, "might both have been drowned in the flood. After we were brought to these caves and tunnels, we might have been killed, a number of times, but we were spared. Then Destiny restored my guns, and guided me here, to join you and Tonto."

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"At least we can all die together," she agreed.

The Lone Ranger shook his head, then realizing that the gesture could not be seen in the darkness, said, "I can't believe that. I can't believe that we have survived so much, only to be killed. We're going to attack that gang with every intention of winning, so Benson and the others can be brought to justice and made to pay in full for the murder of your uncle and of Sheriff Grant and Ripper Smith." "That outlaw deserved to die," put in Betty.

"Nevertheless, Benson committed murder when he shot Smith. Benson has a lot to pay for, and we're going to see that he pays in full."

"When—when you talk like that," the girl said softly, "you almost make me believe that we have a chance." Quite suddenly she said, "Tell me just one thing."

"What?"

"Who are you? Why did you do so much to help me? Why do you keep your face concealed?"

"That makes three questions."

"Please tell me."

"I wear a mask because I want to keep my identity concealed. Tonto is the only one who knows my name, and—"

Tonto interrupted. "Him known as Lone Ranger."

"The Lone Ranger!" gasped the girl.

"That is what I'm called."

"Then that accounts for everything! I've heard so many stories about you!"

"But you are from the East. You haven't been in this part of the country very long—"

"Even in St. Louis I heard about the Lone Ranger! Oh, I've heard ever so many stories. I—I never believed them. In fact, I didn't think there was any such person as the Lone Ranger. I thought—" Betty faltered and then went on. "This may sound strange, but I always thought the Lone Ranger was a

sort of mythical character. Oh, I've been so stupid! I should have known when I heard you call your horse Silver, and your friend Tonto—"

The masked man was embarrassed by the girl's frank admiration. "Let's get to work," he muttered. "Are you ready, Tonto?"

The Indian grunted an affirmative reply and added, "Me ready for long time."

"Can you find your way to the main cavern?"

Tonto said, "Me know way. Me take lead. You follow."

"Go ahead." Then to Betty the masked man said, "You stay in back of me and be ready to run when I give the word."

"Run—back this way when the shooting gets hot?"

"No!" The word was low but emphatic. "Be ready to run for the mouth of the cave—and freedom!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE No Honor Among Thieves

"You BOYS better get the rest of the lanterns lighted. It will soon be dark."

Bart Benson was standing in the mouth of the cave looking eastward over the treetops and across a level expanse of grassland to the turbulent waters of Wolf Creek. A number of wild horses could be seen grazing quietly on the floor of the canyon.

The outlaw leader was feeling well satisfied with himself. In his pocket he held a deed to property that might prove to be worth a fabulous amount of money. The deed was signed by Betty Marberry and ostensibly witnessed by Sheriff Grant. There could be no question about the authenticity of Betty Marberry's signature. The sheriff's name had been forged, but Benson had copied it from a bona fide signature with meticulous care, and he felt confident that

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no clerk or deputy in Scottsville would question the deed this time.

The tall, lean man called Tombstone stepped to Benson's side. "When do you figure on goin' into town?" he asked.

"Tomorrow mornin'. There's no use goin' before the office opens."

"Aimin' to go alone?"

"Why d'you ask?"

Tombstone scratched his chin reflectively. "It's like this, boss," he began slowly. "Some of the boys have been talkin' things over, an' wonderin' where they stand."

"They know where they stand."

"That's just the trouble," Tombstone replied. "They don't. Neither do I. Y'see, Benson, we've all been together on our different deals. When we made off with a herd of cattle or cracked a bank or stuck up a stagecoach or a train, it was always cash in hand. It was easy to divvy it up."

"If any of the boys," cut in Bart Benson curtly, "are dissatisfied with the cuts they've had in the past, tell them to see me. When Ripper Smith was in charge, he always took a sizable cut for himself."

"Ripper Smith," put in Tombstone, "ain't runnin'" things no more. You're runnin' the outfit now, Benson, an' the boys figured you might do different than Ripper. Besides that, there won't be any cash in hand from this deal."

"There's a gold mine. What's gold if it ain't cash in hand?" "Yep," agreed Tombstone, "there's 'a gold mine. You're goin' to register the title transfer in the mornin'.

I expect you'll be showin' yourself as owner. Is that right."

"What else do you expect me to do? I can't very well show the names of men like you an' Flagg an' Scar, to say nothin' of some of the others!" Benson laughed shortly. "There's lawmen all over this state that'd give plenty to know where they could lay hands on you. If word got out that you

were all here as owners of a gold mine, the law'd move in an' you'd all find yourselves in the calaboose!"

Tombstone nodded slowly. "We thought of that," he said. "If the law moved in an' hustled us all off to jail, where would that leave you?"

"Well," snapped Benson, "where would it leave me?"

"I'll tell you where it would leave you, boss. It would leave you sittin' right on top of the heap. You'd own the gold mine. You could work it an' not have to split with anyone."

For a fleeting instant, Benson's face twitched nervously. Though Tombstone had kept his voice low and showed no sign of belligerence in his attitude, there was an underlying threat that told the leader that the men expected something in the way of a double cross. Then he laughed and tried to make the laugh sound hearty. "Why, Tombstone," he said, slapping the thin man on the back, "do you think I'd double-cross my pals like that?"

"Ripper Smith was your pal," Tombstone replied flatly.

"Ripper Smith was a jug head. He was bunglin' everything. We'd have all wound up in jail if we'd let him go on much longer. Don't you worry, Tombstone. An' tell the other boys not to worry. We're in this deal together an' we're all goin' to get rich."

Tombstone was unimpressed by the display of geniality. "When you ride into town to register that paper," he said, "I'm ridin' with you."

"Why?"

"The boys picked me for the job."

"Why should anyone go with me?"

"To keep temptation from nudgin' you into doin' somethin' careless. If I'm with you, you'll register that paper an' maybe buy a few drinks at the cafe, an' then come back here. If you're alone, you might get different ideas, such as tippin' off the actin' sheriff or

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the marshal that he could find some wanted men with prices on their heads if he came here with a posse."

"If you think I'd do anythin' like that—" began Bart Benson hotly.

"Now, now, calm down, boss. We don't say you'd do any such thing, but just to make sure, I'm goin' along."

"That's up to you, Tombstone, but it's dangerous.. You might be seen an' recognized."

"Tain't likely. I'm not known too well in these parts. I'll go along an' take my chances. An' now that that's settled, I'm goin' to pick myself out a new horse."

"A new horse?" queried Benson.

Tombstone said, "I've sort of taken a likin' to that big white stallion."

"Guess again," said Benson. "I've picked him for myself! An' that reminds me. I want to see if I can ride him before it gets dark." He raised his voice and shouted to one of the men, "Throw the saddle on that white stallion. I'm goin' to try him out."

"How would it be," asked Tombstone, "if I took the paint the Indian rode?"

"That's all right with me."

Scout had been brought around from the secret entrance since Tonto had dismounted that morning. He had been tethered next to Silver slightly apart from the row of horses belonging to the gang.

"Bein' as you're goin' to try out the white one," Tombstone said, "I'll toss a saddle on the paint an' try him out at the same time."

"You are suspicious, aren't you, Tombstone?"

"Me?"

"Not goin' to trust me out of your sight for a minute." Tombstone grinned mirthlessly. "Benson," he said, "you've hit the nail right square on the head. We're not goin' to trust you out of our sight—for a minute."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR The Opening Shot

TONTO LED the way. He moved through the dark tunnel one slow step at a time, feeling carefully with his moccasined feet to avoid moving a loose stone or making a slight sound in any pool of water. The Lone Ranger was directly behind the Indian, and last of all came Betty Marberry.

The advance was as soundless as that of three shadows. Perhaps there was no need for such extreme caution. The slashing and gurgling of the underground stream that washed one side of the tunnel floor would have covered the sound of ordinary footsteps, but the game was too big to warrant any risk that could be avoided. It was a game with life the reward for winning and death the penalty for defeat.

Progress was painfully slow. After ten minutes that seemed more like an hour, a faint glow could be seen far ahead. Presently the glow was bright enough to reveal the silhouette of Tonto to the Lone Ranger. Betty, following, could see both the masked man and the Indian as dark outlines against the light.

There was no need for comment. All three of the prisoners knew that the light came from the big main chamber where the outlaws lived and the horses were tethered.

Then there were voices.

The conversation of the Benson gang was unintelligible; Several conversations seemed to be going on at the same time. Occasionally a man would laugh. From time to time an observation or a comment would be lifted above the undercurrent of talk. These comments indicated that at least one poker game was in progress. Tonto moved ahead.

Suddenly there was a clatter of hoofs followed by an angry snarl. There was a

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shrill whinny. To the Lone Ranger it sounded like Silver.

He reached out and touched the back of Tonto. "Wait," he whispered. Tonto halted.

"Let me go ahead," the masked man said in a low voice as he brushed past Tonto.

The voices of the outlaws now became more audible. The masked man gathered from what he could hear that attempts were being made to saddle Scout and Silver. Then he learned that Benson intended to ride the great white stallion, and he smiled grimly. Benson was due for a big surprise. Others had tried the same thing and learned that the wildest of bucking broncs was tame by comparison.

Silver had a way of acting docile up to a certain point, and then exploding suddenly with the violence of blasting powder. Though strangers could sometimes saddle the powerful horse, no one but the Lone Ranger could ride him. He knew every trick of throwing a man, and he used them all.

Benson was saying, "Hurry up an' get that white horse saddled. I'm anxious to try him out. How are you comin' with the paint, Tombstone?"

Tombstone's voice was without emotion. "He ain't objected to the saddle so far. Maybe he won't make any trouble for us."

"I'm countin' on ridin' that white stallion into town in the mornin'," Benson said, and then he chuckled. "I'll tell that claim agent a thing or two for doubtin' my word. I'll just show him this paper with the girl's name signed to it an' witnessed by the sheriff. He can't argue with that."

A new voice broke in. "Benson, you've got the map, haven't you?"

"Map?" repeated the leader of the outlaws.

"You know what map I'm talkin' about. The one you took from Ben Marberry that shows where the gold is."

"Where is the map?"

Benson chuckled softly. "I expect you'll like to know that, eh? Well, it's hidden, see. I'm the only one who knows where it is."

"But boss," argued a man with a nasal, high-pitched voice, "you're about to take your life in your hands when you climb aboard that white horse. If you was to get throwed an' crack your head on this rocky floor, you might be killed."

Bart Benson laughed.

"Even if you weren't killed," the voice continued, "you might lose your memory or somethin' of the sort. I've heard of those things happenin'. If it happened to you, then where would we be? We wouldn't have no idea where to look for the gold."

"Listen to me, you double-crossers!" Benson's voice had a sharp edge. "If I told you where the map was hidden, I'd be askin' for a bullet or a knife in the back."

"Aww-w, Benson — "

"Don't tell me you wouldn't double-cross me! Ripper Smith made a mistake. He trusted you an' he trusted me. Well, I'm not makin' any such mistake. That map is in a place where none of you will ever find it. There's just one man livin' who knows what part of this mountain the gold is in. I'm that man!"

"But the claim is staked out, ain't it?"

"Sure the claim is staked on the surface of the ground. It's staked out on the side of Old Baldy, an' it's about a hundred feet or more above the gold. A man who doesn't know just how to reach the gold from here inside the mountain might sink a dozen shafts before he struck the pay dirt. What's more, those shafts would have to be put through solid rock."

"So you see, gents, it's important to all of you that I stay alive."

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The Lone Ranger moved back soundlessly until he stood beside Betty. "Do you know where the gold is?" he whispered.

The girl replied with a whispered "No." Freedom was the first consideration. If escape was accomplished, the problem would then be to locate the gold. The Lone Ranger knew that Benson must be captured. He must be taken alive and made to surrender the map that Betty's uncle had made.

After speaking to Betty, the Lone Ranger once more stepped past Tonto to take the lead in the slow walk to the tunnel's end. Finally he reached it. He paused and Tonto stepped to his side. Guns in readiness, the two, looked beyond the edge of the arching entrance to the tunnel and studied the men and horses in the big room, which was lighted by a dozen or more lanterns.

All horses, including Scout and Silver, were lined up and tethered to a hitch rail near the stream at one side. Scout was at the end of the line nearest to the tunnel entrance where the Lone Ranger stood. Silver was next to Scout. Both were still tied to the hitch rail, but men stood ready to untie them. Benson and Tombstone were beside the horses, ready to mount, and the other outlaws were near by, watching.

The Lone Ranger noticed that Moon Murdock was not among those present. There was a blanket-wrapped form at one side of the cave. It might be the body of a man, but not Moon Murdock. It was the body of a smaller man. The Lone Ranger rightly guessed that it was Sheriff Grant.

He noted with grim satisfaction that several members of the gang had painful mementos of the day's encounters. Weasel's chin was red and swollen, and he sat on a bunk apart from the others. One man carried his arm in a sling, and a red stain on his tattered shirtsleeve told the story of a bullet wound. Another walked with a painful limp,

a bloodstained bandage showing below his trouser leg.

"There will be more on the sick list before we're through," the masked man told himself.

Bart Benson, as far as the Lone Ranger knew, was not yet wanted by the law in this state, but the same could not be said of the others. Their faces all were familiar; and they had also appeared on many handbills through the West.

Weasel was probably the pettiest of the criminals. He originally had become a fugitive after embezzling from his partner in a dancehall venture. He was generally known as a sneak thief, without the courage to commit a crime where there was any amount of risk involved.

Tombstone was wanted in a number of counties for cattle and horse stealing. Jim Flagg had been convicted of robbery and murder, but had escaped on the way to the territorial prison. The stocky man with the apelike arms, known as Scar Bates, had served a term in prison for robbing the mails. Soon after his escape he had stopped a stagecoach and made off with a considerable sum of money. He had been recognized by the driver and the guard as well as by two passengers who identified the thief by pictures. And there were many others. The Burrows brothers were notorious killers; Jake Sasoon had stabbed to death the owner of a Faro City hotel; Joey Judd had shot a deputy who called Judd in a crooked card game; Mace Dixon was wanted for a number of crimes, including murder.

The Lone Ranger reflected that the rewards for those outlaws would make an impressive total. The men in that cave might be worth as much or more than the gold Old Baldy held.

He put his mouth close to Tonto's ear and whispered, "Are you ready?" Tonto nodded affirmation.

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Once more the Lone Ranger stepped back to the side of Betty Marberry. To the girl he whispered, "You stay here until I call you. When I call, come on the run. We're going to try to make a dash through, that cavern and get out the other side." Betty was trembling, but not with fear. She was tense and anxious. She looked up at the masked man. In the light that came from the cavern her face was taut and big-eyed. "I understand," she breathed.

The Lone Ranger felt to make sure his mask was tightly tied, then gripped his gun and moved back to the side of Tonto.

At the same moment Bart Benson was giving his belt a hitch and making sure his holsters were well tied to the calves of his legs.

Jim Flagg was speaking. "That white horse has been eyein' you, boss. He might cut a few capers when you hit the saddle. Maybe you'd have an easier time if you took off that gun belt."

"Any particular reason why you'd like me disarmed?" demanded the leader suspiciously.

"No reason at all," replied Flagg. "It's just that I've heard stories about the fire an' brimstone that's in that Silver horse."

Benson laughed harshly. "I can ride anything on four legs," he boasted. "The more fire a horse has, the better I like him."

"Suit yourself," Flagg said, shrugging his shoulders.

Tombstone examined the cinch to make sure it was tight around Scout's belly. He gripped the pommel and the reins with one hand.

Silver must have sensed the nearness of his master. His ears were cocked attentively, and he whinnied softly. He pawed the floor with a fore hoof, then shook his silken mane and flicked his plume like tail. He was paying no attention to Benson, who stood on his left side, or to the man

who was about to free him from the hitch rail.

The Lone Ranger waited, holding his gun in his right hand. His left hand was placed restrainingly on Tonto's arm. He wanted to have both Scout and Silver free before he made his bid for freedom.

"Untie him," order Bart Benson. "Get the horse untied, then I'll mount."

"All right, boss."

"Be quick about it!"

"This knot is tight," the other said, as he fumbled with the rope. "The horse must've been pullin' hard onit."

Tombstone had been about to mount. Now he stepped back. "I'll wait an' see how you make out," he said to Benson.

The Lone Ranger spoke in a low voice. "Tonto, we've got to have both horses free."

Tonto nodded.

"As soon as Benson swings up, I'm going to try to snap Scout's line with a bullet."

"Me savvy."

"The fireworks will begin as soon as I fire. Move fast."

The Lone Ranger raised his gun and sighted carefully. He knew that everything depended on that single shot. Bedlam would break loose and a dozen guns would begin to blaze. Both horses were needed for the break for freedom and there would be no time to untie the paint. If Scout were not freed by that first bullet, the escape would be doomed to failure.

The masked man was taken aback when he saw that the sight of his gun was slightly unsteady. Hunger and fatigue had taken their toll. He had the sight squarely on the reins by which Scout was tethered, but he couldn't hold it there. It wavered. Now of all times, when the success of a single shot meant life or death, he felt unsure. He lowered his hand momentarily, then once more brought the ivory-handled Colt to bear.

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"Here I go!" yelled Benson. He placed his left foot in the stirrup and swung his right leg over the saddle.

The Lone Ranger tightened his finger on the trigger. He took a deep breath and held it. His two sights came in line.

Silver uttered one shrill whinny and reared high, his fore hoofs pawing the air frantically. The masked man's gun barked once. The bullet sped straight and true as Tonto cried, "Scout!"

Then things happened fast.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE Battle Royal

SILVER'S FIRST wild leap caught everyone's attention. The totally unexpected crack of the Lone Ranger's pistol split that attention and caused confusion. The men turned quickly in the direction of the shot, dropping their hands instinctively to draw guns, but before they could complete the gestures, twin hurricanes blew up behind their backs.

Scout was free, and in a frenzy to rush to the side of his Indian master. He charged headlong at the men who stood between himself and Tonto, scattering them like tenpins.

Meanwhile, Bart Benson, unnerved by the sharp turn of events, was thrown high out of the saddle as Silver arched his back and shot upward, all four feet off the floor. The horse came down stiff-legged and Benson struck the saddle with force that jarred his spine and completely scrambled his capacity to think or reason. He was in the saddle but an instant before a sudden sunfish movement spilled him unceremoniously. Throwing out his arms to break his fall, he clawed at Tombstone, and the two went down together.

While these things were happening, the Lone Ranger and Tonto dashed out of hiding with their six guns blazing. Those

who had not been spilled by Scout's wild charge or Silver's frantic gyrations brought their pistols into play. They fired from the hip without taking aim. Bullets buzzed harmlessly past the masked man and the Indian to smash into the rocky walls and send chips flying.

And then the gap was closed.

The Lone Ranger was at Silver's side, leaping into the saddle. Tonto was already on the back of Scout.

"At them, Silver!" shouted the Lone Ranger. "At them, boy!"

The gunfire punctuated screams of pain, wild cries of surprise, and shouts of rage. The Lone Ranger and Tonto with their horses were in the midst of the outlaws. This was the kind of fighting Scout and Silver understood. They knew what was expected and responded magnificently. They kicked out with their rear hoofs, then reared high to strike down with fore hoofs. Silver was a fighting fury, keeping everyone off balance.

Jim Flagg screamed in fear as he tried to dodge the lashing hoofs of the big white stallion. He threw himself to one side, and caught a blow on the shoulder. It paralyzed his right arm. His gun fell from nerveless fingers.

Scar stepped back from the scrambling mass and brought up his gun to fire at Tonto. The Lone Ranger snapped a shot in that direction, and Scar's gun became a thing alive, leaping out of Scar's hairy paw to fly several yards through the air smashed beyond repair by the impact of the masked man's bullet. Scar howled and hugged his hand. Weasel went down with a bullet in the thigh, and lay still, sobbing hysterically.

Tombstone had gotten to his feet, but he had lost his gun. It was somewhere beneath the pounding hoofs of horses and the shuffling, staggering boots of men. He didn't stop to look for it. Snatching a knife from his belt, he rushed at the Lone Ranger. Tonto yelled a warning, and the masked man

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turned as Tombstone's arm was coming down. He whipped his gun around. The barrel cracked on Tombstone's wrist, and the knife clattered to the floor. And then the gun came up and down to land on the head of the gray-faced outlaw. Tombstone went down.

It all took place in a matter of seconds. During the excitement no one had time to notice Bart Benson. The outlaw leader had scrambled to his feet after spilling from Silver and had run back, away from the others. He fired once without bothering to aim, and saw one of his own men fall with a bullet in the back. He jerked the line of his own horse, releasing it from the hitch rail, then leaped to the animal's bare back, rowelling the horse's side viciously.

The chestnut mare, already badly frightened by the gunplay and excitement, responded to the spurs in frenzied haste, taking Benson away from the others and out of the cave.

The Lone Ranger was quick to snatch the opportunity when it came. There was a brief instant when all the outlaws were completely off balance. Some were down; some were staggering to keep from falling down; and the rest were dodging away from the flying hoofs of the infuriated Silver.

"Now, Betty!" he cried. "This is it!"

Silver leaped ahead with the masked man's shout. Betty rushed from the tunnel. Leaning out from the saddle, the Lone Ranger reached down, threw his strong arms around the girl's slim waist, swept her off her feet, and held her tightly at his side.

"Come on, Silver!" he cried, heeling the white stallion toward the opening of the cave. He heard a gun bark, and felt a bullet nick his shoulder, but he kept going without a backward glance.

There was another shot and someone cried in pain.

"Maybe got~um!" bellowed Tonto. Then, "Get~um up, Scout! We go now!"

Cold night air had never felt so good. The wind whipped Betty's hair and it beat against her face. She could barely breathe in the tight grip of the masked man who held her. But she was exultant. She and the Lone Ranger and Tonto had overcome odds that at first had seemed insurmountable. They were free!

They were racing downhill through the night. They were, for the moment at least, beyond the reach of the outlaws of Bart Benson's gang!

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX Breath of Freedom

SCAR HAD REGAINED the use of his right hand, which had been numbed by the bullet that had smashed his gun. He found another gun and rushed to the door of the cave to fire six shots after the three indistinct figures who were escaping downhill through the darkness on two horses.

A few of the other outlaws were able to join Scar. They, too, fired, but with scant hope of hitting the fleeing prisoners, who already were far away.

The Lone Ranger held Silver to the dangerous pace until he reached the shelter of trees at the foot of the slope. There he drew rein. He lowered the breathless girl to the ground and dismounted to stand at her side.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"Y~yes," replied the girl in a voice so weak that it belied her words. She tottered and would have fallen if the masked man had not caught her.

"Steady," he said. "The worst is over."

Betty closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she smiled and said, "I'm all right now. It's just the reaction. I can't believe that we are really alive."

"We're alive," responded the Lone Ranger. "And from now on, the fighting is

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going to be different. We'll give that gang of outlaws something to think about."

Surprisingly Betty shook her head. "N-no," she said. "I don't want you to do any more. If you'll just help me get to Scottsville, I'll find a way to get back to St. Louis." "And do nothing about the Benson gang?" "Yes," said Betty. "Let them have the mine." Her voice was stronger, and now she could stand without assistance. Moonlight filtered through the trees to reveal the look of incredulity in the Lone Ranger's eyes.

"I mean it," the girl continued. "I don't care how much gold there may be in that mountain. I don't want any part of it. There has already been too much death and bloodshed. That mine has taken the lives of all the people I loved."

"After all you've been through, are you going to quit?" demanded the Lone Ranger.

"You've been through just as much as I have. I can't defeat those renegades, and I shan't let you do any more to help me."

"Is that why you want to give up?"

The girl nodded.

"Don't you realize what giving up will mean?"

"It will mean that you and Tonto can go your way and continue your good deeds. It will mean that you'll not be killed by Benson's gang."

The masked man shook his head. "You're mistaken," he said. "That's not what it will mean."

"What then?"

"It will mean that your father and your uncle will have died in vain. I will mean that Bart Benson will file the transfer of the property and take over the gold mine. It will mean that he will go unpunished for the murder of Ripper Smith, and the murder of Sheriff Grant. Don't you understand, Betty, you can't quit now! We've got to see

that Benson and every member of his gang is brought to justice."

"But don't you remember what we heard Benson say about that map? He's the only one who knows where the gold is located. He'll never reveal that information. He'll die before he'll tell us."

"That's why our next move must be carefully planned."

"B-but—"

The Lone Ranger interrupted the girl. "I think I know what Benson will do," he said. "I think we can anticipate his next move, and plan accordingly." "He rode out of the cave during the fight." "I know he did. He's somewhere in this canyon right now."

"How do you know what his next move will be?"

"I know what I would do if I were in his position. I think he'll do the same."

"If we did go on fighting that gang, what would our next move be?"

The Lone Ranger said, "We'll go back to the camp beside Wolf Creek. Well get some food—"

"Oh, no!" cried the girl. "If we stop to eat, those outlaws will be on us again!"

"Well not take time to do any cooking. There are some emergency rations in our duffle. We can eat them in a hurry. I don't think those gangsters will be ready to start after us until they've taken time to patch up their wounds and bruises."

"After we've eaten—then what?"

"Then, if you feel up to it, well start across Wolf Creek."

"But it is still flooded," gasped the girl, recalling her narrow escape of the previous night. "We'll drown."

"Maybe not. Tonto got across safely."

"I—I shan't argue with you any more. After seeing that magnificent fight in the cave, I'm willing to do whatever you think best."

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During the short conversation Tonto had been alert and watchful. His eyes had been in constant motion, taking in the woods on all sides, and his ears had been tuned to catch the slightest sound that would betray the approach of a man or horse or both. "Did you see or hear anything of-Bart Benson?" asked the Lone Ranger.

Tonto grinned and pointed to the west. "Hear noise over that way," he said. "Me think maybe that where Benson ride."

Lifting Betty to the saddle, the Lone Ranger said, "Keep a sharp lookout, Tonto. As long as he keeps his distance, we'll leave him alone."

Betty said, "There are no trees near the edge of die creek. If Benson is on this side of the mountain, hell be able to see us. There's a bright moon and—"

"Let him see us," the masked man replied as he seated himself on Silver behind the saddle. "If I were in his position, I'd watch this side of the hill and the level stretch along the shores of the creek. I hope he'll do the same, I'm counting on it."

"But if he sees us, he might open fire."

"If he does, we'll see the flashes of his gun and return his fire. He knows that. I don't think he'll do any more than watch us from a distance and hope we don't know he's watching."

The masked man heeled his horse, and Silver moved ahead. Tonto followed, ever alert for signs of trouble.

They found a path that took them down the steep slope of the canyon to the floor below.

It was a slow, easy trip through the trees and across the level expanse of open grassland to the wigwam that still stood on the bank of Wolf Creek.

The creek was still at flood level, but it was not rushing quite as swiftly as it had been twenty-four hours previously.

Tonto and the Lone Ranger found a place where they could lie on their stomachs and dash handfuls of cold, refreshing water on their faces. Betty watched them for a moment, then unceremoniously followed suit.

The two men quickly packed the gear they had left in the tent, and stowed it on their horses' backs. They found some hardtack.

"These," the Lone Ranger said, passing Betty a share of the hard biscuits, "will take some chewing. They're none too tasty, but they're nourishing."

"Anything would taste good right now," replied the girl. "I think I could eat old harness leather. A cup of coffee would be mighty fine right now," she added wistfully.

"Can't take the time to make it. We'll have to wash the hardtack down with water."

The three ate standing beside the horses. They disposed of the meager rations quickly, then once more prepared to mount.

"Now what?" It was Betty speaking. The Lone Ranger was watching the sky, marking the progress of scattered clouds that scudded toward the moon. "In just a couple of minutes," he said, "those clouds are going to blot out the moon. That will give us just the right amount of darkness." "Darkness for what?"

"You'll see," replied the masked man with a smile. "Now let me help you into the saddle."

They were mounted and ready. With a final glance at the clouds, the Lone Ranger guided Silver into the rushing stream. Tonto followed.

Then both horses were caught in the steady pull of the current and swept along with logs and other driftwood.

Bart Benson watched from a distant hillside. He saw the two horses being carried downstream. He heard a girl's sharp cry of

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alarm and saw the water break over the heads of the horses and their riders. Then a cloud obscured the moon and Benson saw no more.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN Mace Dixon Takes Over

AFTER THE HALFHEARTED efforts of Scar and a couple of the other outlaws to fire at the prisoners who were fast disappearing in the darkness, the men in the cave took stock of the situation. Many were injured by bullets or kicks or blows. All were dazed and bewildered.

Everything had happened within a space of less than five minutes. The sudden appearance of the masked man and the Indian in fighting trim, the wild and devastating antics of Scout and Silver, the escape of all three captives; all this was more than the members of the gang could comprehend.

"Among other things," Tombstone reminded the men, "Bart Benson ran out."

"The yellow rat," growled Jim Flagg. "It's just about what I'd expect from him. He talked up big an' brave to the Lone Ranger when he was backed up by all our guns; an' to the Indian an' the girl as well as Sheriff Grant, when they were tied up like calves for brandin', but the minute bullets started flyin', he lit out, an' he took the claim papers with him."

The others agreed with disgruntled growls of complaint.

Weasel said, "Never mind about Bart Benson. I'm hurt. I'm hurt awful bad. Can't someone do some-thin'?"

"You're not the only one," observed Tombstone, as he rubbed his aching shoulder.

Scar said, "My right arm still feels like it had been hit by a landslide."

"You weren't hit, were you?" Tombstone asked.

"My gun," replied Scar, "stopped a slug from that Lone Ranger's pistol. Have any of you gents held a gun that was jarred by a heavy .45? I'm tellin' you, you can feel it clear to your heels."

Jim Flagg said, "The question is what're we goin' to do now? Do you suppose Benson has run out on us for keeps?"

"I know what I'm goin' to do," put in Jake Sasoon, whose thigh had been raked by one of the many flying bullets. "I'm goin' to patch up my wound."

"Me too," agreed Mace Dixon. "That white horse clipped me on the shoulder."

For the next half hour the fortunate few who had come through the fight uninjured helped the others bathe and dress their injuries. Surprisingly, none of the outlaws had been killed or even seriously hurt, with the exception of one man, who had been killed outright with a bullet in the back from Bart Benson's own gun.

The hoofs of the horses and the swinging guns and fists of the Lone Ranger and Tonto had inflicted plenty of bruises, some of them quite painful. There were a few bullet wounds, but no bones had been broken and none of the wounds was mortal.

Tombstone applied a stinging antiseptic to Mace Dixon's shoulder where the skin had been broken by Silver's hoof. Dixon gasped with the biting pain.

"It won't hurt long," said Tombstone calmly. "Tell me, Mace, did you see Benson when he scooted?"

"Yeah," snarled Dixon. "I saw him. The dirty sneak. I hope to gosh that Lone Ranger catches up to him an' gives him the works, that's what I hope!"

"You're pretty free with your opinion, aren't you?"

"Why shouldn't I be? We went along with Benson when he took over the leadership, an' listened to all his big talk. He was goin' to make us all rich, that's what he was goin' to do, an' now where do we stand?"

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He's got a paper showin' that he owns all the gold in this here mountain. What's more, he's got a map showin' where to find that gold, an' what have we got besides some achin' bones an' cut-up skin?"

Tombstone's face was impassive. "Maybe he'll come back," he said as he fastened a pad of cloth on Dixon's cut.

"Fat chance of that." "Why do you say that, Dixon?" » "At first he didn't know who it was he had captured. Now he knows it was the Lone Ranger. What's more, he knows the Lone Ranger is free. Do you think Benson is goin' to take a chance on meetin' that man face to face? Not Bart! He's too yellow. Besides, there's nothin' for him to gain."

"Do you think," asked Tombstone calmly, "Benson is fool enough to think he can double-cross all of us an' get away with it?"

"He won't get away with it," spat Dixon, "but he may try." Raising his voice he called to the others in the cave. "All you fellows," he said, "come over here. We got to have a conference an' decide what we're goin' to do." When the men had gathered around him, Dixon said, "Me an' Tombstone were just talkin' things over. Ben-son has run out. That means someone has to take charge of this outfit. Then we got to find that Marberry girl an' get her back here."

"She's no good to us now," Jim Flagg put in. "She's already signed over the gold mine to Benson."

"There's two reasons why we got to get her back," replied Dixon. "First we got to see that she don't get to town an' bring the law. Second, we got to make a deal with her."

"What kind of a deal ?" one of the men asked.

"Here's how I size it up," Dixon explained. "As things are now, she won't get any part of the gold mine.

Even if the claim stayed in her name, she wouldn't know where the gold is at."

"Neither do we," said Flagg.

"But we can find it. If we can make the girl work with us, we'll find Benson an' get that map away from him. Then we'll get a statement for the law—a statement signed by the girl blamin' Benson for the murder of Sheriff Grant as well as Ripper Smith. That'll take care of Benson. The rest of us will stay here an' work the gold mine, which same will be in Betty Marberry's name. She can own the property, but we'll move out the gold."

"That all sounds fine," said Jake Sasoon, "but first we've got to find the girl, an' that means tanglin' some more with the Lone Ranger. And then all we have to do is find Benson. You make it sound awful easy."

"I've thought that out," Mace Dixon said. "There's only two trails leadin' from this mountain to Scottsville. Sooner or later the girl an' Benson will have to go to Scottsville. We'll watch those trails."

Several of the men nodded approval of Dixon's suggestion.

"As for that masked man an' the Indian, the boys who will be watchin' the trail will shoot them on sight—shoot from ambush, an' shoot to kill. Now as I said in the beginnin', we got to have a new leader. I'm volunteerin' for the job. Is there anyone who wants to argue the matter?" Tombstone said, "You seem to have thought out a plan of campaign, Dixon. I'll go along with you." "Me too," agreed Jim Flagg. "How about the rest of you?" demanded Dixon. Sasoon said, "As far as I'm concerned, you're elected." The others either concurred or kept still. "In that case," Dixon said, "it's settled. Benson, as well as the girl an' the others, started out downhill toward Wolf Creek. It'll take some time for any of 'em to circle Old Baldy to one of the Scottsville trails. I'll pick the men who are to go an' guard those trails. If we

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haven't got prisoners by daybreak, we'll assume that the ones we want are still in Wild Horse Canyon. That bein' the case, we'll send men out to track 'em down." With surprising executive efficiency Mace Dixon delegated men who had suffered no injury to ride out and take up stations on the trails to Scottsville. He announced that he personally would stand guard at the entrance to the cavern and instructed the rest of the men to turn in and get some sleep.

After the appointed guards had saddled their horses and ridden away, the man who had been killed by Bart Benson was wrapped in a blanket and placed next to the body of the sheriff. Then the men took to their blankets while Mace Dixon seated himself in the chair that the former leader had used at the entrance to the cave.

The night was uneventful. Dixon had long hours in which to consider his plans as the newly chosen leader of the gang. Clouds obscured the moon for a time, but the sky cleared before daybreak.

Mace Dixon dozed for a time and wakened at the sound of hoofbeats. He leaped to his feet and jerked out his gun instinctively. Daylight was well advanced when a rider appeared from the side. It was one of the men who had been sent to guard the lower trail to Scottsville.

"What are you doin' here?" demanded Dixon, hoi-stering his gun. "Did you see anythin' of the girl or the two men with her?"

"Nope."

"What about Bart Benson?"

The rider dismounted. "Didn't see nothin' of him neither," he said.

"Then why'd you come back?" "I left Pete on watch. No one came along the lower trail, so I thought I'd ride back an' report, an' at the same time find out if you had word from the boys who are watchin' the other route to town." "I haven't heard from them." "How long are we supposed to stay on

guard?" "One hour more," announced Mace Dixon, looking at his watch. "If nothin' happens by the end of an hour, I'll send men out to relieve you."

"I wonder," said the guard, "where those people are. D'you think they're still somewhere in the canyon?" "They must be," replied Mace Dixon.-"Unless—" he paused.

"Unless what?"

"Unless they crossed the creek."

"I don't think even the white stallion could make it, with two riders, Mace," the guard said, pointing to turbulent Wolf Creek far below. "Just look at that water. It's still at flood level, an' movin' so fast it's white."

Dixon agreed and added, "Furthermore, Benson has to get to Scottsville to register the transfer. The girl has to get there to see the law. They couldn't reach town by crossing Wolf Creek. They must be in the canyon, waitin' for some reason or other, before they set out for town."

Tombstone moved to Dixon's side, buckling on his gun belt. "Do you mind," he said, "if I join the conference?"

"Not at all, Tombstone," said Mace Dixon heartily. "I didn't know you were awake."

"I've been awake for some time," the stony-faced man said, "awake an' listening. I gather that the people we want are still somewhere in the canyon."

"That's how we figured," said Dixon.

The guard said, "None of them could have gotten to Scottsville without bein' seen."

"Are you sure of that?" asked Tombstone.

"Yeah."

"Don't be."

"Huh? What do you mean, Tombstone? Why shouldn't I be sure?"

"Because you're dealin' with a snake in the grass—namely Benson, who knows ways to get around this mountain without

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usin' any trails. An' you're dealing with the Lone Ranger an' an Indian who's at home in any kind of broken country."

Mace Dixon looked disturbed. "Tombstone," he said, "do you think there's a chance that any of those three men or the girl slipped past our guards?"

"I've been thinking about it considerable," Tombstone replied. "It's downright rugged country, an' it would be mighty hard going off the trail. I'd hate to tackle it in daylight, to say nothin' of tryin' to get through in the dark. But it could be done." "Doggone," the guard put in.

"Why didn't you tell me this last night?" Dixon demanded.

Tombstone shook his head slowly. "It wouldn't have mattered. We couldn't have done more than watch trails. Now, Dixon, if you want my suggestion—"

"What is it?"

"You can see for yourself that the tracks of the horses are plain going down that hill toward Wolf Creek." Tombstone moved out of the cave and pointed to the first of three sets of tracks. "These," he said, "would be Bart Benson's horse. Over here is where the paint horse traveled, an' right here, the horse named Silver. We could follow those tracks."

Mace Dixon's lip curled in something of a sneer. "Tombstone," he said, "maybe you should be the leader of this outfit."

"Now, Dixon, don't get proddy. I'm just offerin' a good suggestion. You can take it or leave it. After that heavy rain the night before last, the ground is soft an' we shouldn't have any trouble followin' the tracks."

"That's exactly what I intend to do this mornin'. Go an' call the men. Tell them to fix themselves some grub. Then I'll pick some of them to follow the tracks."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT Death Notice

MACE DIXON ordered the guard to return to his post, then roused the sleeping men with Tombstone's aid. While a hurried meal was being eaten he selected half a dozen members of the gang who were to ride with him and told them to saddle their horses.

Tombstone, more experienced in cutting sign, took the lead with Dixon at his side, and the others followed. The hoof marks of Scout and Silver and the horse that Benson had ridden were sharp and easy to follow. After less than fifty yards, Bart Benson's tracks branched to the right while the others continued in a straight line downhill toward Wild Horse Canyon.

"Never mind Benson," Dixon said. "We'll pick up his tracks later an' see where they lead. The boys will keep him from gettin' to Scottsville. Right now it's that girl we want to find."

Tombstone pointed to a place among the trees where the horses had paused and the riders had dismounted. "The Indian," he observed after scouting the ground. "stayed in the saddle. The Lone Ranger an' the girl stood right here."

"Did they both remount?" asked Dixon.

Tombstone nodded and said, "I guess so. We'll shove off for the canyon an' take the trail down where the gulch enters the canyon."

Once they had reached the canyon floor they saw that the hoof marks continued through the woods and across the open grassland to the makeshift tent. Here, in addition to the hoofmarks, there were several freshly made prints of moccasins and two sizes of boots. It was a simple matter for Tombstone to interpret the prints.

"They stopped here for a spell an' went inside the shelter."

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"Then where did they go?" asked Mace Dixon impatiently.

"Dixon," Tombstone said slowly, "you can see for yourself those tracks lead straight into the creek."

"You mean they went across?"

Tombstone shrugged his shoulders. "That ain't what I said." He squinted at the far bank. "I don't see any hoof marks over there. It looks to me like they went into the water an' got washed downstream for some distance. I expect we'll have to follow along the bank until we come to the place where they carne out."

"They couldn't cross that stream," decided Dixon. "See how fast that water's movin'? No horse could survive with two in the saddle."

"Maybe not an ordinary horse," Tombstone replied, "but that white one an' the paint can hardly be called ordinary. I never in all my life saw such powerful critters."

"Why should they cross the stream? They couldn't get to Scottsville that way."

Once more Tombstone shrugged his narrow shoulders. "It could be that they were more interested in gettin' away from us than they were in reaching Scottsville."

At this moment one of the men in the rear let out a cry. "Hey, Dixon!" he yelled. "Look off to the right an' see who's comin'!"

Dixon and the others turned quickly.

"It's Benson!" exclaimed Tombstone.

Mace Dixon mouthed a livid curse and jerked out his gun. Tombstone's hand clamped down upon his wrist.

"Hold it, Dixon!"

"That yellow rat!" snarled Dixon. "After the way he ran out on us last night, he needs cuttin' down!"

"I second that, Dixon, but remember, Benson knows where the gold is at."

"He's probably got that map on him," Dixon said.

"Maybe he has, an' maybe he hasn't. If we kill him an' find he doesn't have it on him, well never find it. Now let's play this thing sensible. Let's see what Benson's got to say for himself."

"You ready to take him back as leader?" "No, no," Tombstone said soothingly. "Nothing like that. You're the leader, Mace. We'll all stand by you, but let's play along with Benson for a spell."

"All right," Dixon agreed grudgingly. He let his half-drawn pistol drop back into the holster and waited quietly until Bart Benson halted.

"Tombstone, Mace, all of you! I'm glad you're here!" said Benson by way of greeting. "I've got good news for you! I pulled a slick trick last night!" "You sure did," Dixon agreed, "You ran out on us!" Bart Benson took on a painted expression. "Is that what the boys are sayin'?" he asked in a hurt voice. "What do you expect 'em to say?" "I left the cave because I saw just how things were goin,'" Benson explained. "I had to size up the situation in a hurry an' think fast. I saw that the masked man an' the Indian had everythin' figured out. I knew they were goin' to break loose an' reasoned that they'd take the girl with them. I got out first so I could watch an' see where they went."

"Too thin," said Mace contemptuously. "If you expect us to believe any such yarn as that—" "But, Mace—"

"Never mind," cut in Tombstone. "Save your breath, Benson. You ran out on us. Let it go at that. It was just a little mistake that anyone could have made in the excitement. The point is, what did you do after you got out? Where have you been all this time? Did you try to get to Scottsville?"

"Scottsville?" Benson said. "No, no, of course not."

"Maybe," put in Mace Dixon, "you spotted our guards on the trail an' changed your mind."

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"Wait a minute, Mace," said Tombstone. "Benson claims he brings us good news. What is it, Benson?"

"It's about the girl an' the Lone Ranger an' that Indian."

"What about them?"

"They're dead."

This flat announcement brought a stir from all the men.

"Dead!" echoed Tombstone.

"That's right. They went into the creek, aimin' to cross to the other side. I was watchin' from up on the hill. I heard the girl cry out, then all three went underwater. That's the last I saw of them."

"You sure they didn't get out?" asked Dixon.

"The moon was blotted out by a cloud for a short spell. When it came out again there was no sign of anyone—not even the horses. They're done for, I tell you, an' we've got nothin' to worry about. We've got the girl's signature an' there's no one can argue about who owns the gold inside Old Baldy."

"All we've got to do now is register the title transfer an' start diggin' gold!"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The Showdown

BART BENSON announced that he had explored the bank of Wolf Creek for a considerable distance without finding any indication that the fugitives and the horses had left the water.

"How far downstream did you look?" asked Tombstone.

"As far as I could." Benson pointed to a place a quarter of a mile downstream where the grassy expanse ended in a stand of timber that grew to the water's edge. "I went as far as those trees," he said.

"But you didn't follow the creek through the trees?"

"Of course not," replied Benson curtly. "The wild horses are in among those trees."

"Scared of them, eh."

"It's not that I'm scared of the horses, Tombstone. It's just that there's no point in looking down there. Even if the girl an' the two men had come ashore, we wouldn't find their tracks. The wild horses would have stamped them all out."

"I'm satisfied that those three are dead," Mace Dixon said. "Benson saw them go down. Then he waited an' watched, but didn't see them come up. He even followed the creek back downstream to make sure they didn't leave the water. They're dead!"

"Of course they're dead," replied Benson. "An' now that the girl's out of the way, we can all go back to the cave an' make plans to cash in on the gold mine."

Dixon felt a surge of anger at the way Bart Benson had resumed his position as leader. He wanted to declare himself. He wanted to tell Benson that he, Mace Dixon, was now the leader of the gang. But when he saw how the others in the group accepted Benson's decision without comment or objection, he wisely decided to hold his tongue in check.

There was little talk during the uphill ride to the cave. The men who had remained there were surprised to see Bart Benson. When Benson explained why he had run out during the fight, he improved on the story he had told Tombstone and Mace Dixon. He told it even more convincingly and the men seemed satisfied.

When he had finished, he announced the deaths of Betty Marberry, the Lone Ranger, and Tonto, he said, "There's nothin' in our way now, boys. We'll make a fortune in no time. I'll start for Scottsville right away an' get the title to this property registered in my name. At the same time I'll make sure that everyone in town thinks the girl has

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gone back East, an' that Sheriff Grant went part of the way with her."

Sasoon pointed to the two blanket-wrapped figures. "What about those?" he asked.

"We'll have to bury them, but you can leave them there for the time bein'."

"Do you figure on starting for Scottsville right now?" asked Tombstone.

Benson said, "The sooner the better."

Tombstone nodded. "I'll toss my saddle on a fresh horse an' keep you company."

"Are you still suspicious of me, Tombstone?"

The thin man merely grinned.

Meanwhile, Mace Dixon sat alone, apart from the others, laying out a deck of playing cards in a game of solitaire. It was becoming increasingly hard to keep his resentment under control. He had thoroughly enjoyed his brief reign as leader of the gang. He was seething inwardly because Benson had returned and resumed his former position. He looked up briefly when Benson and Tombstone left the cave for the trip to Scottsville.

"Benson's day," he told himself, "is comin' soon." He fingered the greasy cards mechanically with little interest in his game.

"The boys are willin' to accept me as their leader," he continued to himself, "as long as Benson's not around. That means me an' Benson are goin' to have a showdown, an' it's comin' just as soon as I find out where he keeps that map showin' the location of the gold."

Noon came and went. The afternoon dragged slowly. It was nearly five o'clock when a man in front of the cavern entrance shouted the news that Benson and Tombstone were returning.

Benson was the first to ride into the cave with Tombstone right behind. He jerked back the reins and pulled his horse to

a rearing halt, and then dismounted with a flourish.

"It's all set!" he exulted to the men.

"Any trouble?" queried Sasoon.

"Not a bit. The man who's in charge of the office looked at the paper an' the girl's signature. He checked it against another paper with her name on it, an' admitted that it was the same handwritin'. Then he compared the sheriff's signature to another paper—" Benson chuckled. "That was when I held my breath an' kept my fingers crossed, but I didn't need to worry. I did a slick job of copyin' the sheriff's name. Then me an' Tombstone—"

"Cut it short," said Tombstone. "The claim is registered in your name. That's all that matters."

Mace Dixon stepped forward, his face red with anger. "So," he said, "you're the owner of the Old Baldy claim. Where do we come in?"

Benson eyed Mace Dixon coldly. "You an' the others," he announced, "are goin' to work the claim. You'll get a share of the profits. Anythin' wrong with that?"

"We got as much right to be owners as you have."

"Except for one thing, Dixon. You're wanted by the law in this state. Maybe you forgot that little detail, but I haven't, an' neither have the lawmen in these parts. If you go into town an' show that face of yours, you'll make a one-way trip to the jail!"

"Tombstone's wanted by the law here, too. He didn't go to jail."

"I," said Tombstone, "am a long way from the counties where I'm wanted. I'm practically a stranger in these parts."

"You're all riled up, Dixon," said Benson. "Why don't you calm down an' accept the fact that I'm still the leader of this outfit?"

Dixon grumbled something beneath his breath and walked away.

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Bart Benson and Tombstone turned their horses over to a couple of subordinate members of the gang and moved to the rear of the cavern.

Then Benson called the men together and said, "Now, boys, I'm goin' to tell you where the gold is."

There were several involuntary murmurs of interest.

"As you know, Old Ben Marberry made a map of these tunnels. On this map he showed exactly how to reach the sold-bearin' rock."

"Where is the map?" someone asked. "It's gone."

Benson chuckled at the hollow-voiced exclamations that followed his announcement. "Don't worry," he said, "we don't need it. I studied the map an' made some marks on the tunnel walls so I could find my way around. Then I got rid of the map. I burned it."

"Where is the gold?" asked Tombstone.

Benson pointed to one of the larger tunnels that radiated from the main cavern. "We enter that tunnel," he said, "an' take a lantern. I've scratched a number of x's along the wall. They're not very big. You wouldn't know they were there unless you were lookin' for them. They show the way through the tunnels to that cavern where we had the sheriff staked out. That, gents, is as far as you have to go."

"Is that where the gold is?" demanded Jim Flagg.

Bart Benson nodded.

"That's all we want to know!" It was Dixon speaking. His words were sharp. "You, Benson," he continued, "you're a yellow rat. You ran out on us last night, an' you'd do it again if it suited your purpose. You double-crossed Ripper Smith, an' shot him in the back!"

"Hold on, Dixon," snapped the leader. "I don't like that kind of talk!"

"I don't care whether you like it or not!" retorted Dixon. The two faced each other several yards apart. The other outlaws, sensing that a showdown was at hand, drew back to be out of the line of fire should the argument lead to gunplay.

"We see through your scheme," continued Dixon. "You're the only one of us who isn't wanted by the law in these parts. You got this property registered in your name. You'll let us go to work with picks an' shovels an' dig out a pile of pay dirt, then when it's about time for you to divvy, you'll tip off the law. We'll all be marched to the calaboose, leavin' you with all the gold!"

During the tirade Benson looked at the faces of the outlaws and realized that Mace Dixon's argument had made a strong impression. The men were obviously now on Dixon's side.

"Mace," he said, "you've got no call to talk to me like that."

"You heard what I said, Benson. You're a sneakin', double-crossin' rat. On top of that, you're yellow. If you were half a man, you'd go for your gun. I'm callin' you, Benson."

"There's nothin' to be gained by shootin' it out, Mace. If we start fightin' among ourselves, nobody will win."

"That," said Dixon, "is a matter of opinion."

Beads of nervous sweat broke out on Benson's face. "If you want this claim registered in your name, Mace," he said, "maybe it can be fixed up that way. Let's talk it over."

Dixon's voice cracked like a pistol. "Go for your gun!"

Benson looked around with a light of frenzy in his eyes. "Boys," he cried, "are you going to stand by an' let this go on? Dixon has gone loco! Close in on him an' take his gun before he shoots! You, Tombstone, do somethin'!"

Tombstone shook his head solemnly.

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"You've all planned this!" screamed Bart Benson. "You all talked it over an' planned to double-cross me like this as soon as you found out where the gold was hidden!"

"Go for that gun!" barked Dixon. "I'm callin' on you to draw." There was no compromise in his voice. "It's you or me. If you don't draw when I count up to three I'm lettin' you have it anyway. One—two—"

Bart Benson went for his gun.

At that instant two shots rang out in the cave.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Conclusion

FOR THE FIRST few seconds after the twin barks of the two six guns, the outlaws couldn't comprehend just what had happened. They had been watching the showdown between Bart Benson and Mace Dixon. They had expected to see one or both of the men go down, clutching at a mortal wound.

Neither went down, but both howled in pain, and clutched a shattered hand from which a gun had fallen.

A new voice rang out from one side. It was a deep, resonant voice that carried authority.

"Freeze!"

All eyes turned in that direction.

Benson cried out, "It's a ghost!"

There were other startled exclamations as the tall, masked man stepped forward. He held two guns, one in each hand, and from the barrel of each gun there rose a thin thread of smoke.

The masked man was not alone. Tonto stepped to his side, and then, from the tunnel opening came a deputy sheriff named Lawson and a dozen men with rifles.

"Does anyone care to start gunplay?" demanded the Lone Ranger. "If so, I promise you these special deputies won't

shoot as I did, at your hands or arms. They'll shoot to kill."

Those who had made a motion toward their guns were quick to change their minds. They held their hands at shoulder height and exchanged glances of bewilderment.

Tombstone was the first to speak.

"I suppose," he said, "you came here by way of the secret entrance?"

The Lone Ranger nodded. "We're obliged to you," he said, "for showing that entrance to Tonto. It made it possible for us to get here without being noticed."

"How long have you been in that tunnel?"

"Long enough," replied the deputy sheriff.

"We arrived," said the Lone Ranger, "almost as soon as you and Benson. We left town right behind you."

"And we heard all that was said," put in another deputy. "We heard Benson tell how to find that gold. I guess Miss Marberry will have her gold mine after all."

Lawson said, "Disarm those men."

The outlaws were disarmed and lined up along one wall of the cave. They were a crestfallen lot of men. Tombstone alone had any interest left. His usually expressionless face wore a frank look of admiration when he spoke to the Lone Ranger.

"Just how," he asked, "did you do it? We heard that you an' the Indian an' the girl had drowned last night in Wolf Creek."

"That is what we wanted you to hear. We knew that Benson was in a position to watch us. We watched for a cloud to obscure the moon. Just before that, we pretended we were drowning. Benson got just the right impression."

The masked man turned toward Benson, who had wrapped a handkerchief around his injured hand. "We wanted you to think that Betty Marberry was dead so you'd feel quite secure when you went into town to

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record the transfer of the title to the gold mine."

Benson showed a flash of interest. "The title was transferred," he said. "It's in my name now."

"Guess again," said Lawson. "We'd already talked to this masked man and Betty Marberry. We were laughing up our sleeves all the time you and Tombstone were in town. We never recorded any change in title."

Benson's face fell. He sighed heavily.

"If you think," went on the deputy sheriff relentlessly, "that we haven't any charges against you, you're wrong. We have a full and complete statement from Miss Marberry, naming you as the murderer of Ripper Smith and Sheriff Grant."

It took less than half an hour to get all the outlaws ready for the trip to Scottsville. While Lawson directed the tying of the prisoners' hands, the Lone Ranger and Tonto went with two men and a litter into one of the tunnels. By lantern light, the masked man picked out the route by following the crosses that Benson had scratched on the stone wall. He found the inner cavern without difficulty, and careful examination proved that the hardpan into which he had driven the stakes showed unmistakable evidence of containing gold.

By the time the masked man and Tonto had returned to the outer room, followed by two deputies who carried Moon Murdock's body on a stretcher, Lawson was ready with his prisoners to start back to town.

"This," announced the lawman with a slow grin, "is the biggest roundup of outlaws this part of the country has ever known." He sighed and then went on, "I only wish Sheriff Grant could have lived to see it."

The Lone Ranger said, "Lawson, I have a feeling that the sheriff knows what is

happening here and knows he didn't die in vain."

Betty Marberry's home on the side of Old Baldy became a showplace in that part of the country. It was a large and comfortable house, built of timber that had been cut out of the near-by woods. In time a number of other buildings dotted Wild Horse Canyon. They were occupied by men who worked Old Baldy Mine. First the hardpan had been worked for the dust and nuggets it contained. Then a rich vein had been found in the rock. Tons and tons of high-grade ore were hauled from the tunnel to be crushed in a massive machine and transported to a smelter that had been set up in Scottsville. Old Baldy had been made to give up its wealth.

Rewards for the capture of the outlaws had reached a staggering sum and every penny of the money had been turned over, at the Lone Ranger's suggestion, to the widow of Sheriff Grant.

Wild Horse Canyon was a different place, but there were several mementos of the struggle that had taken place there. There were two graves with stone markers bearing the names of Betty's father and his brother Ben. And there was a third small monument. Betty alone knew its significance. It stood close to the bank of Wolf Creek on exactly the spot where a crude little shelter had been fashioned by a brave man on a stormy night.

Often in the years that followed, Betty Marberry found herself thinking of the man with the mask who had appeared one stormy night, saved her from the trampling hoofs of the stampeding band of wild horses, rescued her from the flood-swollen stream and from the hands of the outlaw band, brought the members of the gang to justice, saved the fortune that she had thought to be lost, and then disappeared.

She remembered that last time she had seen him. It was the evening they had ridden back from Scottsville to attend

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Sheriff Grant's funeral. He and Tonto had gone quickly about their preparations for their journey south. Then Tonto had ridden on ahead. Betty had insisted upon accompanying the Lone Ranger as far as the steep trail that led down into Wild Horse Canyon. There they had stopped for a moment to say good-bye. "Will I ever see you again?" she had asked, a note of sadness in her voice.

"Quien sabe?" he had replied. And then he had taken her hand in his powerful grasp. "Good-bye, Betty, and good luck," he had said, touching his hat with his left hand in salute. "There's still a lot of work to be done in this great West of ours, Betty, and trails seldom cross again once they're behind us."

Then he was gone. She could hear the sound of shale under Silver's sure-footed hoofs. She heard the splash as he entered the stream. Then, suddenly, from up the canyon came the crack and thud of many hoofs, the snorting and shrill nickerings of a stampeding band of wild horses. Betty's heart had leaped to her throat for fear that the masked man might be caught in that charge of the wild horse herd.

As she strained her eyes in the deepening dusk, she caught sight of a blur of white. There, on a low shelf of rock above the canyon floor a level ray of the disappearing sun illuminated for an instant the tableau of a great white stallion and his gallant rider. A moment later the canyon was in darkness and the sound of wild hoofs was dying away in the distance. Suddenly a clear voice rang out above all the other sounds of the night: "Hi-Yo, Silver—away!"